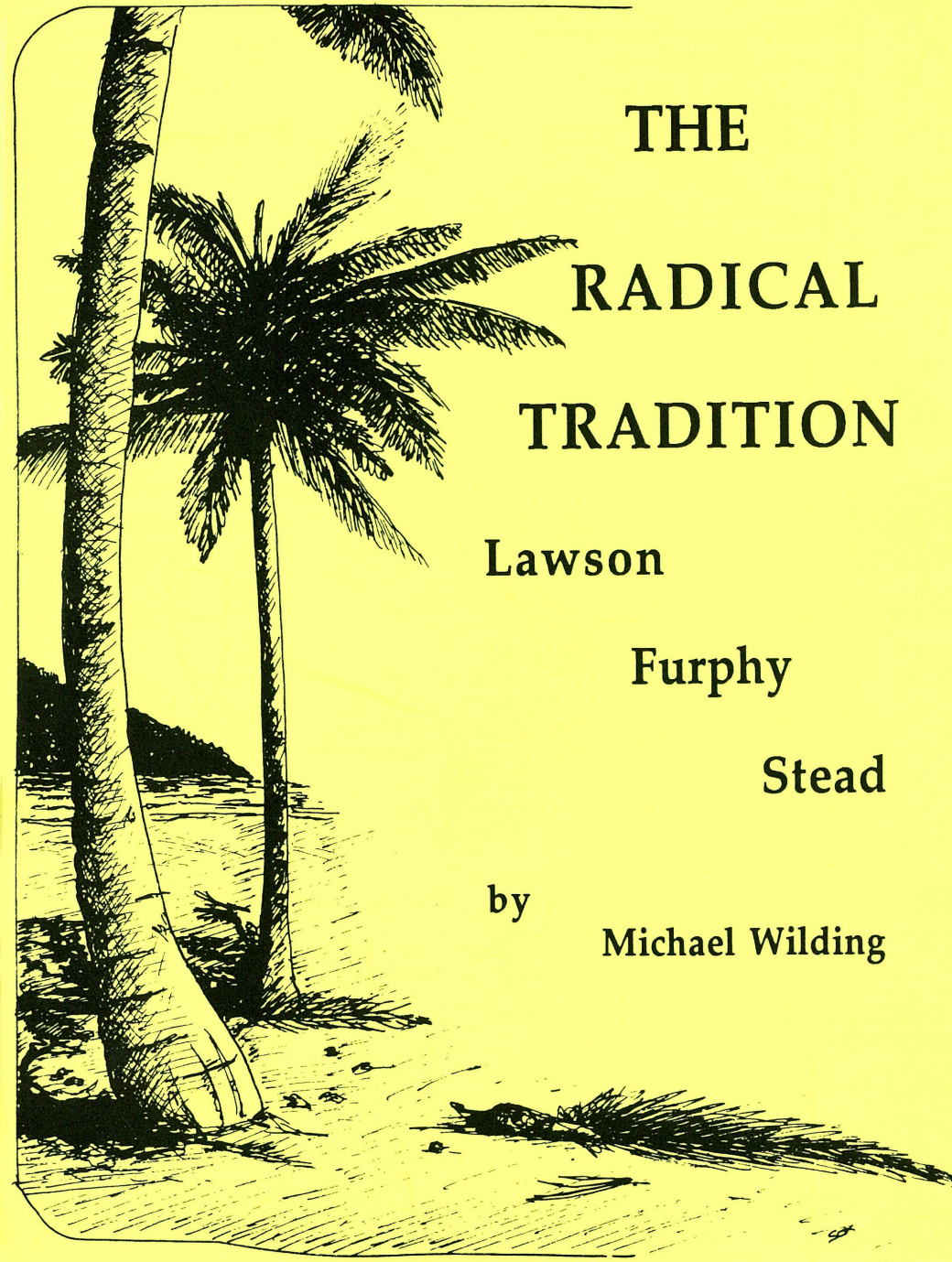

THE RADICAL TRADITION

Lawson
Furphy
Stead

by

Michael Wilding

FOUNDATION FOR AUSTRALIAN LITERARY STUDIES
1993

The Colin Roderick Lectures: 1992

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PREFACE

The Colin Roderick Lectures, sponsored by the Townsville Foundation for Australian Literary Studies, are delivered annually by a distinguished Australian writer or academic at James Cook University, and subsequently published by the Foundation. The series is named for Emeritus Professor Colin Roderick, Foundation Professor of English at James Cook University and distinguished Lawson scholar. Colin Roderick also established the Foundation in Townsville in 1966 and continues in his retirement to play an active role as its Vice-Patron. The publication of the Lectures makes them available not only to members of the Foundation but to the world-wide literary and academic community interested in the study of Australian literature.

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Professor A.J. Hassall
Executive Director

Chapter 1

HENRY LAWSON'S SHORT STORIES

Henry Lawson's political education began early. His uncompleted "Fragment of Autobiography" recalls the bitter experience of unemployment:

> I knew what it was to tramp long distances and be one of a hopeless crowd of applicants. I knew what it was to drift about the streets in shabby and patched clothes and feel furtive and criminal-like. (II 209)[1]

And a conscious political response was there in the Republican Union, founded in 1887 by a group that included his mother Louisa Lawson, Thomas Walker, George Black, John Norton and J.D. Fitzgerald. Henry helped print the Union's journal, *The Republican,* contributed political pieces, and was the registered publisher.[2] It was in this context that he wrote his first published poem, "A Song of the Republic", which appeared in *The Bulletin* on eight hours day, 1887. It was followed by "The Song of the Outcasts", "Faces in the Street", "The Hymn of the Socialists" and other such ballads that captured the mood of radical ferment of the late 1880s. The first of a series of shearers' strikes began in Queensland in 1889 against a refusal to employ union labour; the unions won. In 1890 the maritime strike lasted for two months in Sydney and Melbourne. In 1891 the Queensland shearers' strike lasted for six months, before being defeated.[3] Lawson was in Brisbane from March to September 1891 working for *The Boomerang,* a weekly paper established by William Lane.[4] Lane

had moved on to edit Australia's first union paper, *The Worker*, and Lawson contributed to this while he was in Brisbane, "Freedom on the Wallaby" appearing in the middle of the strike.

> They needn't say the fault is ours
> If blood should stain the wattle.[5]

It was cited in the Queensland parliament as evidence of a violent conspiracy — provoking Lawson to write another poem, "The Vote of Thanks Debate". *The Boomerang* retrenched staff and Lawson returned to Sydney "with glowing reports about Lane" according to Jack Lang, later Lawson's brother in law and Labor premier of New South Wales.[6] The strike had been defeated, the union leadership arrested, union funds consumed. But back in Sydney Lawson still associated with political journalists and organisers, getting house-painting work with W.A. Holman, later a Labor parliamentarian, and two former members of the Social Democratic Federation and the Socialist League from Britain, G. Chandler and A.G. Yewen, a personal friend of William Morris.[7]

> When the trade failed me I used to write a column of red-hot socialistic and libellous political rhymes for *Truth*. I still believed in revolutions, and the spirit of righteousness upheld me. *Truth*'s "ghost" was eccentric, and the usual rates for outside contributions were from 5s. upwards; but John Norton gave me 15s. to £1 for special stuff. (II 112)

The five years from 1887 to 1892 provided an intense and compressed political education for Lawson. He had experienced the heady days of the Republican Union, followed by its splits and collapse; the mass strike actions unprecedented in Australia in 1890; the romantic fervour of the shearers' strike, and its repression by 1300 troops and special constables; and the period of defeat and reassessment and indecision.

It is in the context of these experiences and these political beliefs that I shall now look again at some of Lawson's best known stories.

"A Day on a Selection" (*Bulletin*, 28 May 1892) is an endearing and enduring account of a selection, a small farm, in the process of disintegration. The selector spends the day talking to his neighbour, asserting a mateship of idleness instead of the individualist hard work drive that theoretically should make the selection thrive. And the sketch ends with the splendid dinner table discussion of Henry George, Edward Bellamy and Ignatius Donnelly, in which nothing gets said because of the constant interruptions by the fowls and children.

The story has provoked various responses. A.A. Phillips offers a characteristic nationalist reading:

> Lawson's estimate of the bushmen is not entirely, and therefore unconvincingly, eulogistic. Like most men of strong patriotic feeling, he can attack sharply where he finds weaknesses which threaten his people. Although he had an affection for the bushmen's casualness he turns acridly critical when he finds the casualness degenerating into sluggishness of mind. In "A Day on a Selection", for example, he assails the squalor of an Australian smallholding, arising from the indifferent ignorance of this owner. It is true that this selector is an Englishman, but Lawson is obviously suggesting that the conditions which he is here painting are characteristic of the country. Indeed, there is little point in the sketch unless it is intended to criticize a national weakness.[8]

But there is a lot more to "A Day on a Selection" than to "criticize a national weakness." The issues focussed here are complex and political; they show the tensions and contradictions and exploitations within the "national". In 1892 there was still no Australian "nation" — federation came in 1901. The interest is in class situation, international capitalism, international workers' movements. The very references in the concluding discussion to the French Revolution and to the works of social change by the American writers Henry George (*Progress and Poverty*), Edward Bellamy (*Looking Backward*) and Ignatius Donnelly (*Caesar's Column*) proclaim an internationalist context. Of course there is irony, but irony does not cancel the signification, only resituate it. It is not accidental or incidental that Lawson spells out his

selector's nationality in the opening sentence: "The scene is a small New South Wales Western selection, the holder whereof is native-English. His wife is native-Irish" (I 43)[9]. It is not unrelated that Lawson's father was a Norwegian migrant and his mother's father was an English migrant, a gipsy.

But it is not only that the migrant selector is representative of Australian social reality: to leave it at that is simply to give a slightly more inclusive vision of the nation. The other point, of course, is the alienation of the migrants — cut off from their home, their native environment, and unconnected with the Australian soil. There is no relationship with the land because these migrants are already alienated figures, often alienated from the land in Europe, certainly alienated from its unfamiliar nature in Australia. And this is all part of an international vision of social alienation: it is this situation that Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1887) and William Morris's *News from Nowhere* (1890) confronted.

In the autobiography he began but never published, Lawson spelled out the socio-economic context of his parents' selection:

> our land was about the poorest round there, where selectors were shoved back amongst barren, stony ridges because of old land grants, or because the good land was needed to carry sheep. Our selection, about three hundred acres, lay round a little rocky, stony, scrubby, useless ridge, fronting the main road; the soil of the narrow sidings, that were not too steep for the plough, was grey and poor; and the gullies were full of waste heaps of clay from the diggers' holes. It was hopeless — only a lifetime of incessant bullocking might have made a farm of the place. (II 185)

In this context it is hard to read the story as any simple attack on "the indifferent ignorance" of the selector and "casualness degenerating into sluggishness of mind." Rather, if there is degeneration, we should find it in the social conditions that treat sheep better than men — a complaint against capitalism that goes back to Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516): "your shepe ... eate up and swallow down the very men themselves."[10]

Shiftless and hopeless the selectors may seem, but what other choice is there? Bourgeois aspiration (an organised spick and span farm) or socialist aspiration (Bellamy) are equally distant from the selector's reality. So that what can be seen as a critique can be resituated as a sympathetic portrayal of it all being too much, of everything slipping, collapsing: as indeed things socially and economically were. T.A. Coghlan's *Wealth and Progress of New South Wales*

> revealed that while 212,639 selections were sold in New South Wales over 12 years, 1876-88, individual holdings of one acre and upwards had increased only from 39,639 to 46,142. In 1889 580 persons held 25 million acres comprising 53 per cent of the alienated land of New South Wales. These facts caused the early Australian interest in progressive land taxation.[11]

The mentions of Henry George are not out of place.

The militancy of "The Army of the Rear" and "Faces in the Street" has been succeeded by the experience and expression of exploitation and defeat. The cooperation of unionism, the heightened consciousness of union discussions raised by ideological awareness of repressive techniques and Utopian possibilities has fallen apart in "A Day on a Selection" into the discussion in which nothing is said, in which work, practice, is disastrously separated from theory. The work isn't done, the cows escape as the selector and his neighbour talk.

The theory never gets beyond sad tokens, the gestures towards sloganizing as the titles and authors are cited, but the slogans never deliver a meaning, the titles are announced but the contents of the books never expounded. This is not only the rundown defeat of the sinking small selectors, who from a union point of view represent a petty bourgeois, selfish, competitive individualism resistant to union cooperation. In this regard Lawson's sketch retains a vanguard militancy, the absent shearers the true socialists, while the selectors are the unorganized riff-raff. But it can also be interpreted as expressing the situation of the defeated socialists after the strike defeats: titles are mentioned and nothing else because it is all now inexpressible. The

repression of the 1890s has begun and the days of innocently expounding communism and socialism are over. Even to cite the titles is provocative enough. But as long as nothing is said, as long as no politics are expounded, it can be done.

Colin Roderick has noted of "A Day on a Selection" that "*The Bulletin* printing of this story carried the sub-title 'A Sketch from Observation,' and the selection is obviously modelled on that of Lawson's father."[12] Not only the material circumstances of the selection are observed, but also the intellectual context; both are sketched from Lawson's own lived experience. I have indicated an internationalist aspect to the invocations of *Looking Backward, Progress and Poverty* and *Caesar's Column*. There was simultaneously a specific Australian application. The three titles were amongst a core of socialist and progressive books available from *The Worker* book fund from November 1890 to March 1892. There were twenty-five titles available altogether, but these three were amongst the most popular and representative.[13] These were, indeed, the titles that were discussed. Moreover, William Lane had initiated a Bellamy society in Brisbane and had serialised *Looking Backward* in *The Worker* through 1890. *Progress and Poverty* had been serialised in the Sydney press in 1879, and Henry George made a lecture tour of Australia in 1890.[14]

In its silences and ambiguities "A Day on a Selection" can be read in multiple ways. The stasis, the futile stand-off situation with escaping cattle ranged against Henry George, expresses the desolate paralysis of the radical movement. The socialist reader can find a correlative for the sense of defeat, of block, of impotence. At the same time another reading is possible: a presentation of impractical, incompetent theoreticians who cannot succeed at the basic level of farming work. The images, the slogans, the situation are loaded with political potential, explosive with meaning.

"The Drover's Wife" (*Bulletin* 23 July 1892) offers another vision of selection life and a tribute to the courage and resilience of the women in the bush. It tells simply of a woman's vigil to protect

her children when a snake gets under the house. She waits all night, and past events are recalled, flood and fire, giving the story a mythic dimension. Out of these recurrent experiences of pioneering life Lawson extracts the representative. In part the snake and woman confrontation is of course Edenic, an Australian Genesis, which is why the story has had such a powerful impact. But the Edenic is itself a political myth. "When Adam delved and Eve span, who was then the gentleman?" When the snake has been killed the dog "shakes the snake as though he felt the original curse in common with mankind" (I 51): the curse of labour, and suffering in childbirth. Henry Kingsley's phrase that Australia was a workingman's paradise provides the social specificity for the archetypal reference.[15] Lane's novel re-examines *The Workingman's Paradise* from a socialist perspective. Lawson is doing the same in brief.

The situation the woman is in is quite specifically established. She is alone because her husband is away working: the economic cause underlying the breakup of the family, the enforced separations. He is also set in a precise social category. He is an ex-squatter. The squatter who has lost his land either to the banks or through alcohol or both, is a recurrent figure in Lawson's work — "Middleton's Rouseabout" and "Telling Mrs Baker" are characteristic. The situation is clearly related to current social reality. The archetypal quality of Lawson's work comes from its precise observation of social class particularity. It is not a mystifying, unplaced, never-never land pastoral with figures unlocated in history or class that Lawson creates.

Lawson like Lane was concerned with class cooperation. Socialist propaganda required getting the middle classes sympathetic to the rights of labour, and showing them they too were vulnerable to the destructive effects of capitalism. Consistently in his work he tries to break down divisions: to show the parallels of the city and the country workingclass life; to show the destructive effects of the system on working and middle classes. "The Big Brassingtons came down in the world and drifted to the city, as many smaller people do, more and more every year", he writes in "The House That Was Never Built" (I 426). In the

background is the process remarked in the *Communist Manifesto:* "the lower strata of the middle class ... sink gradually into the proletariat ...."[16]

A recognition of the situation of women and a concerted effort to press for women's rights was part of the developing socialist consciousness of the union movement. The isolation, the loneliness, the hardship are succinctly evoked. Here is the drover's true mate, his marriage mate, his wife, separated from him by the work situation.

At the same time another sexual politics emerges, and the woman's clubbing the snake to death suggests a revenge on the phallic, a refusal of the procreative. The dryness of the outback has dried out the sexuality of its struggling pioneers and left only resentment, resentment at being brought to and left in such an isolated place. The eldest child, who tries to get out of bed when the snake is killed "but his mother forces him back with a grip of iron", offers an Oedipal conclusion to the story:

> "Mother, I won't never go drovin'; blast me if I do!"
> And she hugs him to her worn-out breast and kisses him; and they sit thus together while the sickly daylight breaks over the bush. (I 52)

With its absent drover, "The Drover's Wife" poignantly presents the broken family, "the practical absence of the family among the proletarians" as the *Communist Manifesto* puts it;[17] the drought, as well as a naturalistic portrayal of conditions, represents too the drought of sexual absence; and this in its turn issues in the destruction of the masculine, the killing of the snake and burning it.

"The Drover's Wife" is saturated with the political. The implicit allusion to the slogan of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, the illustration of the process of the destruction of the family described in the *Communist Manifesto,* arise naturally from the highly politicized context in which Lawson was writing. The slogan of a radical Eden — "When Adam delved and Eve span, Who was then the gentleman?" had remained in currency for 500 years; it was part of the revolutionary tradition that the

socialists and unionists of the 1890s were able to draw upon, a vision of primal egalitarianism, before the development of class society. The *Communist Manifesto* was serialized in the Brisbane *Worker* in 1893 and reprinted in the same year as a pamphlet. Every fictional situation was likely to have its iconic significance and political interpretation. "The Drover's Wife" shows isolation, not co-operation. The loneliness of bush life has been remarked by commentator after commentator. But the point of the loneliness that Lawson recurrently presents is its economic base. The itinerant bush worker and the small selector are in a hopeless situation, with none of the social back-up of established peasant societies. The big pastoralists control the profitable land. The Queensland unions have been crushed, and though the New South Wales unions had for the moment staved off confrontation, they were to be defeated in the big strike of 1894. In this story of absences, one of the significant absences is that of co-operative action, of unionism. At the same time it is not a totally bleak vision. The story ends with the coming of dawn. A weak, "sickly" dawn, but still an assertion of renewal and hope. That positive note, basic to a socialist vision, programmatic for socialist realism, is firmly there.

"The Union Buries Its Dead" (*Truth* 16 April 1893) is another classic picture of bad times in the bush. It opens with a delicate suggestion of Maupassant, and then the Seine is quickly redefined as a billabong:

> While out boating one Sunday afternoon on a billabong across the river, we saw a young man on horseback driving some horses along the bank. He said it was a fine day, and asked if the water was deep there. The joker of our party said it was deep enough to drown him, and he laughed and rode farther up. We didn't take much notice of him.
>
> Next day a funeral gathered at a corner pub and asked each other in to have a drink while waiting for the hearse. They passed away some of the time dancing jigs to a piano in the bar parlour. They passed away the rest of the time sky-larking and fighting.

> The defunct was a young union labourer, about twenty-five, who had been drowned the previous day while trying to swim some horses across a billabong of the Darling. (I 81)

Manning Clark captures the tone of the story: "he was telling Australians that the bush barbarians had their own way of showing they knew just as well as the author of the book of *Ecclesiastes* what life was all about."[18]

The story has a more specific socialist purpose than this, however:

> He was almost a stranger in town, and the fact of his having been a union man accounted for the funeral. The police found some union papers in his swag, and called at the General Labourers' Union Office for information about him. That's how we knew. (I 81)

The unionism is part of the subject. The General Laborers Union of Australia had been established two years earlier in February 1891. The Australian Shearers' Union had organised the New South Wales shearers, the G.L.U. "took up the work of organizing the woolshed laborers."[19] W.G. Spence, who was president of the A.S.U., was secretary. It was a radical innovative union. Spence recalled:

> A great deal of good work was done by the G.L.U. It made experiments in the shape of carrying out road work and sewerage contracts under co-operation, the Union finding the deposit, plant, etc., and the men dividing the result of their labor. The Union also engaged Mrs Summerfeld to organize the women workers.[20]

The progressive socialist position was to create one big union of an alliance of all working people. But class society permeated the working classes as well as the middle classes. The distinctions between skilled labour and unskilled labour persisted, not only in pay differentials but in status and union organisation. Although it was proposed to amalgamate the Australian Shearers' Union with the General Labourers' Union in 1892 and again in 1893, a

majority of the shearers voted against the proposal; in 1892 5862 were for, 5997 against. In 1893 4825 were for, 5686 against. However the NSW branches gave a majority of 576 in favour, and the NSW branches were allowed to amalgamate. "Practically amalgamation was agreed to at the Conference of 1894, but the new constitution was only adopted at the special convention held in Albury in February, 1895."[21] The amalgamated organisation was called the Australian Workers' Union. In 1904 the Queensland and NSW AWUs amalgamated.

These class divisions within the working classes are part of Lawson's story:

> The procession numbered fifteen, fourteen souls following the broken shell of a soul. Perhaps not one of the fourteen possessed a soul any more than the corpse did — but that doesn't matter.
>
> Four or five of the funeral, who were boarders at the pub, borrowed a trap which the landlord used to carry passengers to and from the railway station. They were strangers to us who were on foot, and we to them. We were all strangers to the corpse.
>
> A horseman, who looked like a drover just returned from a big trip, dropped into our dusty wake and followed us a few hundred yards, dragging his pack-horse behind him, but a friend made wild and demonstrative signals from a hotel verandah — hooking at the air in front with his right hand and jobbing his left thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the bar — so the drover hauled off and didn't catch up to us any more. He was a stranger to the entire show. (I 82)

The separations between those on horseback and those on foot are class separations. "A Barrier which became equally marked was the one separating those who worked on horseback from those who did not," G.A. Wilkes has noted, and he offers representative evidence from the literature.[22] The horseman does not have solidarity with the labourers on foot. A sympathy, yes, but mateship and the society of alcohol draw him off. Similarly the shearers pay their alcoholic respects to the procession but do not join in.

> On the way to the cemetery we passed three shearers sitting on the shady side of a fence. One was drunk — very drunk. The other two covered their right ears with their hats, out of respect for the departed — whoever he might have been — and one of them kicked the drunk and muttered something to him. (I 82)

What Lawson represents are the class divisions within the working classes; at the same time solidarity of the labourers is stressed in their attending the funeral of the unknown man. So we have Lawson's characteristic bitter-sweet plangency, that celebration of the impulse towards solidarity, and the notation of the forces opposed to solidarity.

The divisions between labour had been considerably broken down, but progress still had to be made, before the horsemen would continue to the funeral, and the shearers get off the fence and join in with the rouseabouts. Lawson remarked on the sense of superiority of the shearers that underlay the class divisions between shearers and labourers in "A Word in Season" in *The Worker* (Sydney) in 1894:

> Get rid of the idea that the shearers are the only wronged men on earth and the squatters the only tyrants.
>
> Remember that the hardship of bush life at its worst is not a circumstance compared with what thousands of poor women in cities have to go through.
>
> Remember that there are bitterer struggles and grander battles fought by the poor of cities than ever in the country.
>
> Remember that the fathers, the heroes of modern Liberty, fought and threw away their lives on barricades in the streets of cities. (II 28)

The opening of Harte's "Tennessee's Partner" — "I do not think that we ever knew his real name"[23] — and the disquisition on the names people went by is taken up by Lawson and rewritten with political implication. Apart from being the representative unknown outback worker, the dead man's anonymity carries suggestions of the necessarily pseudonymous nature of early radical activity. The Queensland shearers' strikes had meant that many union activists had changed their names to avoid

arrest or to gain re-employment. Mitchell remarks in "The Man Who Forgot": "and as for a name, that's nothing. I don't know mine, and I've had eight" (I 158.) Lane edited *The Worker* and wrote *The Workingman's Paradise* under a pseudonym, John Miller. Lawson regularly used the names Joe Swallow, Cervus Wright, and Jack Cornstalk to sign political pieces. Larry Petrie, the Scots born secretary of the General Labourers' Union had been christened George Frederick Augustus Howard Carlyle Petrie, he said, and as G.F. Howard he booked a passage on a non-union crewed ship and was arrested for causing an explosion aboard, in July 1893.[24]

The name the dead man went by has a deeply sardonic implication. James Tyson (1819-98) was one of the largest landholders in Australia, whose name was constantly in the Brisbane *Worker*. "By 1898 Tyson owned about twenty stations in Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland, amounting to about five million acres including 350,000 acres freehold."[25] Tyson was notorious for his meanness; and "Banjo" Paterson recalled: "When he had become a very rich man, he could never get over the old bush habits ... He used to travel with a packhorse and sometimes when he was going across country he would camp for the night with a lot of drovers, but he would never tell them who he was."[26] But this is no incognito Tyson, as the dead man's age makes clear. This is the anti-type, the union labourer who owned nothing. And even when his real name is discovered, it is forgotten by the narrator and never given us.

In July 1893 the first 220 members of the New Australia Cooperative Settlement Association under the chairmanship of William Lane sailed for Paraguay. Lawson wrote a poem in support, "Something Better".[27] But the movement was seen by many as a further weakening of socialism within Australia. A second batch sailed in December, but by then the first group had already been split and the movement destabilized. Lawson stood in as editor of the Sydney *Worker*, hoping to be given the permanent position, but someone else was appointed, and he went

to New Zealand looking for work. The voyage steerage issued in the poem "For'ard", published in the *New Zealand Mail*, the Sydney *Worker*, and Keir Hardie's *Labour Leader*.[28] On the offer of a position on the new *Daily Worker* Lawson returned to Sydney, only to find the paper had collapsed. The unions were once again under attack from the pastoralists in the attempt to cut wages and the consequent strikes and violence of 1894. At this period Lawson seems to have been close to Mary Cameron (later Mary Gilmore), who was living in a boarding house kept by William Lane's wife, Annie, preparatory to joining Lane's Colonia Cosme, the second communist settlement in Paraguay. The other radical centre Lawson frequented was McNamara's bookshop in Sydney, a library and centre for international radical journals and discussions.[29] In 1896, with his first book of poems *In The Days When The World Was Wide* published, he married McNamara's step-daughter, Bertha.

This radical world had been Lawson's milieu for ten years. But now radicalism was in retreat; the unions had been badly defeated, membership dropped disastrously. Collecting his contributions from the papers of those years for book publication, he had to endure considerable sub-editorial emendations. The texts collected in his books often lack the political specificity of the original magazine publication. But encouraged by the critical reception of these books in England, Lawson made plans to go there, and sailed in April 1900. *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* published some half dozen of Lawson's stories between November 1900 and October 1901, from his new collection *Joe Wilson and his Mates* (1901).

The opening story of the volume, "Joe Wilson's Courtship", starts off with an attempt at a happy note. "There are many happy times in this world when a healthy boy is happy" (I 537). But within pages the note of despair, hidden sadness, unspecified misery is introduced: "and if I had no more to regret in married life than I have in my courting days, I wouldn't walk to and fro in the room, or up and down the yard in the dark sometimes, or lie awake some nights thinking ... Ah well!" (I 538). And we have the characteristic bitter-sweet Lawson note. The attempt to launch on

a literary career in London was part of Lawson's attempt to take remedial action and halt his descent into the vortex of depression and alcoholism. The political movement to which he had committed himself and which had provided the rationale and aesthetic of his work was in disarray. So that attempt at positive thinking, launching off on the next stage of a literary career, was one shrouded in the context of pervasive pessimism. Turning from the political to the private he had only his increasingly unhappy marriage, and the memory of his parents' stormy and unhappy marriage to confront. The four long stories about Joe Wilson and his wife Mary, an archetypal (Joseph and Mary) pair of young settlers, show the destructive effects of economic hardship and the struggles of the life of the small selector in the bush on marital relationships. The theme is there not only in Joe and Mary's marriage, but reinforced in the lives of the few neighbours. Far longer than those early *Bulletin* sketches, these stories purport to a fully fledged realism of recorded detail, rather than that earlier allusive impressionism. "'Water them Geraniums'" opens with an inventory of Joe Wilson's furniture and possessions. But this realism is something of an illusion. Just as Lawson had produced material acceptable to the *Bulletin's* rigid preconceptions — short, boiled down, spares — now he could simulate the more discursive mode of mainstream British magazine realism. Much of the force of these stories, however, lies on their margins. The effects are as oblique as ever. The glancing, the tangential, the implied, the allusive, are the tactics Lawson uses to capture his material. The ostensible direction or mode of the story is not the "point": rather it is a strategy employed by Lawson in order to slip in the unacceptable — the material the editors and publishers would refuse if they thought that was the central concern. The innocence of Joe and Mary is a way of introducing the sexual threats that could not be written about in a direct way, at a time of repressive censorship of sexual materials in the printed word. The story tells of Joe's slow, bashful courting. There is a delicately idyllic episode where Joe helps Mary hang out clothes, a celebration of ordinary, daily activity at that time not ordinarily experienced by those who could afford servants. (By

the time Lawson was writing these stories in England, he and his wife had a servant; and he was causing considerable class confusion in the village by wanting to carry his purchases home from the shop himself, as he tells in the third of his "Letters to Jack Cornstalk." (II 158)

> I took the line from Mary, and accidentally touched her soft, plump little hand as I did so: it sent a thrill right through me. (I 543)

The idyll turns into embarrassment as Mary shoos Joe away so she can hang up unnamed things he is not allowed to see. The sexual implications in the sheet hanging are now drawn attention to; not exactly made explicit because they are unmentionable. But the unmentionable exerts its strong force of absence, appropriate for Joe's unfulfilled inexpressible sexual yearning. Later Joe's "handkerchiefs and collars disappeared from the room and turned up washed and ironed and laid tidily on my table", and "I felt so full of hope and joy." Then Jack tells him "I see you've made a new mash, Joe. I saw the half-caste cook tidying up your room this morning and taking your collars and things to the wash-house" (I 546). Not only is there the simple humour of love's delusions, there is also the racial categorizing which again marks an unbridgeable gulf for Joe. All the racist complex of attitudes are brought into play here. The issues are also class issues. Mary, as Jack describes her early on, is

> a nice little girl in service at Black's ... She's more like an adopted daughter, in fact, than a servant. She's a real good little girl, and good-looking into the bargain. I hear that young Black is sweet on her, but they say she won't have anything to do with him. (I 538)

She is described in terms that make her appear of marginal working class status. Though "in service" she is treated like a daughter. The station owner's son could be just wanting sexual diversion, or it could be marriage; it is left unclear. Joe's relationship with Mary would be upward mobile; with the half-

caste cook, unnamed, downward mobile. Racial and national and class characteristics are recurrently indicated in this story. Mary's father had

> been an old mate of Black's, a younger son of a well-to-do English family (with blue blood in it, I believe), and sent out to Australia with a thousand pounds to make his way ... They think they're hard done by ... I wish I'd had a thousand pounds to start on!
>
> Mary's mother was the daughter of a German immigrant ... (I 545)

All these issues of sexuality and race and class are brought into play in the fight Joe has with the Romany. The Romany, the gipsy, presents the classic sexual threat to the Anglo-Celtic.

> he was a big shearer, a dark, handsome fellow, who looked like a gipsy: it was reckoned that there was foreign blood in him. He went by the name of Romany. He was supposed to be shook after Mary too. He had the nastiest temper and the best violin in the district ... (I 546-7)

It is the alter ego of Joe Wilson-Henry Lawson. Joe's "I reckon I was born for a poet by mistake" (I 537) incites the identification of Joe with Lawson. Lawson continually recurred to his foreign blood, to his Norwegian father and his gipsy grandfather. The innocent naive bush poet Joe fights the sexual, gipsy, bohemian violinist Romany; Romany represents that sexual, decadent, bohemian milieu Lawson was trying, maybe not wholeheartedly, to escape.

The Romany has been unseated from his horse in the dark by the clothes line Joe has strung up, doing his own washing. It is not this that provokes the fight, however, but Romany's dismissive attitude to Mary. "I've heard a tom-cat sing better" (I 547) brings in a taunt of sexuality, the promiscuity of the tom-cat allied with the insult in the gender shift; a gender shift enacted in Joe's feminisation in, like most of the single, itinerant workers, having to do his own washing. But the final insult is Romany's statement: "She's setting her cap at that jackeroo now. Some girls will run after anything with trousers on" (I 548).

In fighting Romany, of course, Joe is displacing the aggression he feels for the jackeroo, who has turned up at Black's and is interested in Mary. The Romany's comment stirs up his sexual anxiety about the jackeroo, but Joe cannot fight the jackeroo directly. The class divisions prevent it.

Jack Mitchell has noted "the almost universal appearance of the, in reality, highly untypical "love-triangle" involving a worker, a man from the ruling class, and a woman (from either class) in our pre-Tressell proletarian novel."[30] The triangular situation proves unreal here — Mary is not in love with the jackeroo: but it is real enough as a fantasy situation to provoke Joe to a displaced hostility to Romany. What Lawson shows is how an inexpressible aggression to the ruling class produces an expressed aggression to the scapegoat racial minority, the gipsy. This is no mere metaphor. The gipsies no less than the Jews were victims of the extermination camps, and continue to be harried and harassed in England and Europe today.

Out of a simple, purportedly innocent, clean, positive love story, Lawson produces an oblique sexual-political-radical exploration. The displaced centre of the story is about displacement. Proclaimed themes are often suspect; the explicit proclamation invites the suspicious reader to seek other meanings. Lawson was such a suspicious reader; subtle, elliptical, oblique. And the seemingly prolix manner of the Joe Wilson stories allows him to pace these oblique insertions, revelations, intimations. Edward Garnett wrote:

> I have never read anything in modern English literature that is so absolutely democratic in tone, so much the real thing, as "Joe Wilson's Courtship." And so with all Lawson's tales and sketches. [Tolstoy and Howells, and Whitman and Kipling, and Zola and Hauptmann and Gorky have all written descriptions of "democratic" life; but none of these celebrated authors,] not even Maupassant himself, has so absolutely taken us inside the life as do the tales "Joe Wilson's Courtship" and "A Double Buggy at Lahey's Creek". And it is this rare, convincing tone of this Australian writer that gives him a great value now, when forty-nine out of fifty Anglo-Saxon writers are insisting on *not*

> describing the class they were born in, but straining their necks and their outlooks in order to describe the life of the class which God has placed beyond them. Hence the comparative decay and neglect of true realism, the realism of *Tom Jones*, and of *Emma*, of *Barchester Towers*, and of *Middlemarch*, [of much of *David Copperfield* and of *The Newcomes*.][31]

Lawson's attitudes to race are much more complex than the caricature of him as a racist and a fascist in Humphrey McQueen's *A New Britannia*.[32] Australian society was racist at the turn of the century, like most Anglo-Celtic societies. To stress union racism and ignore establishment racism is to give a grossly distorted picture. Lane, Lawson and other socialists could see the racist politics being played — the introduction of "indentured" kanaka labour in Queensland, the non-unionized work structures of the Chinese, in order to break the emergent union movement. Immigration was a major method used by the capitalists to force down wages by creating huge labour surpluses. The reactive, racist response to these economic manoeuvres is recorded in Lawson's work. But to represent is not necessarily to endorse. What *is* remarkable is how he shows the nature of racism as displaced class antagonism in "Joe Wilson's Courtship" and his presentation of the possibility of the transcendence of racism in his next collection, *Children of the Bush* (Methuen, London, 1902). The opening story, "Send Round the Hat", describes the spontaneous charity, the organized co-operative mateship of "The Giraffe", a six foot three inch gangling bushman always making collections for the down and out.

> Some years before, camels and Afghan drivers had been imported to the Bourke district; the camels did very well in the dry country; they went right across country and carried everything from sardines to flooring boards. And the teamsters loved the Afghans nearly as much as Sydney furniture-makers love the cheap Chinese in the same line. They loved 'em even as union shearers on strike love blacklegs brought up-country to take their places.
>
> Now the Giraffe was a good, straight unionist, but in cases of sickness or trouble he was as apt to forget his unionism as all

> Bushmen are at all times (and for all time), to forget their creed. So, one evening, the Giraffe blundered into the Carrier's Arms — of all places in the world — when it was full of teamsters; he had his hat in his hand and some small silver and coppers in it.
>
> "I say, you fellers, there's a poor, sick Afghan in the camp down there along the —"
>
> A big, brawny bullock-driver took him firmly by the shoulders, or, rather, by the elbows, and ran him out before any damage was done. The Giraffe took it as he took most things, good-humouredly; but, about dusk, he was seen slipping down towards the Afghan camp with a billy of soup. (I 473)

The socialist aspects of the *Joe Wilson* volume had been subdued and implicit. The years of writing for the radical press had ensured the development of Lawson's radical vision, whether political themes were explicitly proclaimed or not. The verses "The Never-Never Country" that conclude the volume, however, pay explicit tribute to "Oh rebels to society!" and "The communism perfected!".[33] In *Children of the Bush* the socialist and unionist is foregrounded. *The Athenaeum* commented:

> one finds it right and natural that a strong democratic note should ring through these pages. But it is rather a pity that the note should be quite as insistent as it is, that it should be aggressive, and that, on occasion, it should sound bitter.[34]

Here he collects stories about unionists, stories about the meaning of socialism. The Giraffe's taking round the hat for the ostracized and impoverished prostitutes is a definition of socialism in practice. In *The Workingman's Paradise* Nellie kisses a sleeping prostitute on a park bench and announces "This is socialism."[35] Lane's younger brother Ernie recalled how Arthur Rae, a New South Wales Labor politician and vice-president of the New Australia Association, told Lane: "Nellie should have left half a crown in her hand — that would have been practical socialism."[36] Lawson's story shows socialism in practice. The model of Christ and Mary Magdalen is in the background, of course. Lane's socialism had been part of a religious belief, and he blamed the failure of New Australia in part on his not having stressed the

religious aspect of it to recruits. Lawson shares this general orientation: Christian analogies gently permeate *Children of the Bush*. The "bush missionary", unionist Peter McLaughlan, preaches in "Shall We Gather at the River", when the clergyman fails to arrive, a sermon of reconciliation.

"Lord Douglas" proclaims its political context with its opening:

> The Imperial Hotel was rather an unfortunate name for an outback town pub, for outback is the stronghold of Australian democracy; it was the outback vote and influence that brought about "One Man One Vote", "Payment of Members", and most of the democratic legislation of late years, and from outback came the overwhelming vote in favour of Australian as against Imperial Federation. (I 492)

And the hotel is described in its place in out-back politics.

> The Imperial Hotel was patronised by the Pastoralists, the civil servants, the bank manager and clerks — all the scrub aristocracy; it was the headquarters of the Pastoralists' Union in Bourke; a barracks for blacklegs brought up from Sydney to take the place of Union shearers on strike; and the new Governor, on his inevitable visit to Bourke, was banqueted at the Imperial Hotel. The editor of the local "Capitalistic rag" stayed there; the Pastoralists' member was elected mostly by dark ways and means devised at the Imperial Hotel, and one of its managers had stood as a dummy candidate to split the Labour vote; the management of the hotel was his reward. (I 492-3)

The manager is representative of a recurrent type in Lawson — the immigrant with nothing known about his background. After his arrival in England Lawson developed his presentation of this type with a new sense of English class differentials. "Jack Mitchell reckoned, by the way he treated his *employés* and spoke to workmen, that he was the educated son of an English farmer — gone wrong and sent out to Australia. Someone called him 'Lord Douglas', and the nickname caught on" (I 493).

The story details some of the confrontations between unionists and "Lord Douglas" until the manager disappears and is gaoled for embezzlement, but the focus is on his return from gaol, when some are in favour of boycotting him, kicking him out of town, tarring and feathering him. But Mitchell insists on passing round the hat to help the manager get back on his feet. And is proved right; the final paragraph notes he opened a shop "and the *Sydney Worker, Truth,* and *Bulletin* and other democratic rags are on sale at his shop" (I 499). It is a straightforward parable of Samaritan socialism, class collaboration. Though this bare outline of its conscious socialist content does not do justice to the subtlety, irony, comedy and self-awareness of the writing, it is not a naive fable. It concludes:

> He is scarcely yet regarded as a straight-out democrat. He was a gentleman once, Mitchell said, and the old blood was not to be trusted. But, last elections, Douglas worked quietly for Unionism, and gave the leaders certain hints, and put them up to various electioneering dodges which enabled them to return, in the face of Monopoly, a Labour member who is as likely to go straight as long as any other Labour member. (I 499)

Lawson had gone outback to Bourke in September 1892, spending some ten months there, and making a 200 mile tramp to Hungerford. Nationalist commentators have tended to privilege this episode as "the never-forgotten trip in north-west New South Wales which represented his sole experience of life outback."[37] But the stress is more properly put on the continuity of Lawson's socialist education at Bourke, rather than on the unique "brief", "real" experience. The stress on Lawson the untutored, intuitive responder to life situations has served to deny his conscious socialist art. He certainly was that sensitive, intuitive, responsive writer, but the context of these intuitive responses, the intellectual, didactic and aesthetic framework were determined in large part by his commitment to a radical socialist purposefulness. Lawson was in continual contact with the vanguard of revolutionary, radical, socialist unionist thinkers and activists. He puts his friends from this Bourke period into his

stories in *Children of the Bush* with their names minimally changed and the union roles they did indeed play spelled out: Teddy Thompson, "Tom Hall, the Shearers' Union Secretary", "Billy Woods, the Labourers' Union Secretary", and "Donald Macdonald — shearer, union leader and labour delegate to other colonies on occasion" (I 471, 484, 485). Once again Lawson was within this vanguard group under Lane's influence. Both William Wood and Tom Hicks-Hall became organisers for the New Australia Cooperative Settlement Association and joined Lane in the Colonia Cosme settlement in Paraguay in 1895, and Wood remained there after the settlement broke up, until his death in 1935. Teddy Thompson went there in 1893. Donald Macdonald was responsible for getting the *Sydney Worker* going again in 1897, organizing the Bourke branch of the AWU to take it over, merging it with the *Workman,* and making it pay for itself by 1898.[38]

The stress on the native woodrose wild, unlettered son of the soil, Australian nationalist image of Lawson is one that fails to take account of the intense and unique socialist education that continual contact with unionists and socialists meant. He wrote for the radical and union press. He worked with journalists and union organizers who discussed the lively range of progressive socialist ideas in circulation. Radical works were serialized, excerpted, reviewed and sold through the union. To read Lawson's stories out of this context, to exclude this milieu in which he lived, wrote, published and took his pleasure, is to give a deprived and inadequate and ultimately absurd account of his art.

Even that classic comic story "The Loaded Dog" has its politics.

> They had a big black young retriever dog — or rather an overgrown pup, a big, foolish, four-footed mate, who was always slobbering round them and lashing their legs with his heavy tail that swung round like a stock-whip. Most of his head was usually a red, idiotic, slobbering grin of appreciation of his own silliness. He seemed to take life, the world, his two-legged mates, and his own instinct as a huge joke. (I 333)

Ken Stewart has extrapolated these mateship allusions to claim that "The Dog is idealized Mateship", "a caricature of his own masters and a satirical but delighted idealization of bush gregariousness."[39] It was William Lane who explored the identification of socialism and mateship in his socialist propaganda. And the mateship of the dog here is given its political coloration. It is red and black, the colours of anarchy. Anarchism was one of the theoretical positions of the radical left groups with which Lawson associated. Geisner, in Lane's *The Workingman's Paradise,* explains

> Anarchical Communism, that is men working as mates and sharing with one another of their own free-will, is the highest conceivable form of Socialism in industry.[40]

The association of the loaded dog with anarchism is emphasized by the "formidable bomb" that it carries in its mouth. We tend now to associate bombs with aerial warfare; but in 1901 the bomb was more specifically the instrument of the anarchists.

The dog that steals the bomb and then gets blown up is described as

> a vicious yellow mongrel cattle-dog sulking and nursing his nastiness under there — a sneaking, fighting, thieving canine, whom neighbours had tried for years to shoot or poison. (I 335)

Denton Prout identified the phrase "yellow dog" as a term used for a non-union contract.[41] The destruction of the yellow dog would then suggest the destruction of either the pastoralists' contract, or the non-union scab labour that signed it. When the original dog is described for the last time in the story it is "smiling his broadest, longest, and reddest smile of amiability" (I 336). The red aspect, the communist revolutionary, is stressed. The identifying colouration alternates between the red and black anarchist and the red communist and socialist.

The recognition of Henry Lawson as a serious and subtle artist has been a major critical achievement of the last thirty years. We now have an understanding of Lawson as a conscious and sensitive and sophisticated writer. But the concentration on the artistry and craft of Lawson's writing has been at the expense of his ideas.

The critical consensus has been that Lawson's best work is not to be found in his political writing. When, however, we restore the historical context of Lawson's work, when we resituate it in its once contemporary context of ideas, a much fuller reading emerges. That separation of the political and the non-political dissolves, and we find in those works that now endure a rich specificity of social observation and political thought. The seemingly casual, artless sketches are revealed as contributions to an on-going debate of ideas. That is why we continue to turn to his writings, and come away from them with the satisfactions of delight and instruction.

1. Henry Lawson, "A Fragment of Autobiography", *Autobiographical and Other Writings 1887-1922 (Collected Prose,* volume II) ed. Colin Roderick, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1972. All quotations from this edition.

2. Colin Roderick, *Henry Lawson: A Life,* Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1991, 34ff.

3. See Robin Gollan, *Radical and Working Class Politics: A Study of Eastern Australia 1850-1910,* Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1960; H. Kenway, "The Pastoral Strikes of 1891 and 1894" in D.J. Murphy, R.B. Joyce and Colin A. Hughes, eds., *Prelude to Power: The Rise of the Labor Party in Queensland 1885-1915,* Jacaranda, Brisbane, 1970; D.J. Murphy, ed., *Labor in Politics: the State Labor Parties in Australia 1880-1920,* University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1975.

4. Roderick, *Henry Lawson: A Life*, 67-77.

5. Henry Lawson, *Collected Verse: Volume One: 1885-1900*, ed. Colin Roderick, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1967, 124.

6. J.T. Lang, *I Remember*, Invincible Press, Sydney, 1956, 17.

7. Roderick, *Henry Lawson: A Life*, pp. 79, 102. On the influence of Morris in Australia see Bruce Mansfield, "The Socialism of William Morris: England and Australia," *Historical Studies Australia and New Zealand*, VII (1956) 271-90.

8. A.A. Phillips, *Henry Lawson*, Twayne, New York, 1970, 70.

9. Henry Lawson, *Short Stories and Sketches 1888-1922 (Collected Prose*, volume I) Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1972. All quotations from this edition.

10. Thomas More, *Utopia*, ed. J.H. Lupton, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1895. (Ralph Robynson translation, 1551).

11. Cited in L.G. Churchward, "The American Influence on the Australian Labor Movement", *Historical Studies Australia and New Zealand*, V (1952) 263-4.

12. Colin Roderick, *Henry Lawson: Commentaries on His Prose Writings*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1985, 21.

13. Michael Wilding, "William Lane and the *Worker* Book Fund: Progressive Books at Cost," *Southerly*, 41 (1981) 329-34.

14. Michael Wilding, introduction to William Lane, *The Workingman's Paradise*, Sydney University Press, Sydney, 1980, 27, 36-8.

15. Henry Kingsley, *The Recollections of Geoffrey Hamlyn*, London, 1859, I, 103-4.

16. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, translated by Samuel Moore (1888), Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1973, 53.

17. *Manifesto*, 68.

18. Manning Clarke, *Henry Lawson: The Man and the Legend*, Macmillan, Melbourne, 1985, 36.

19. W.G. Spence, *History of the A.W.U.*, Worker Trustees, Sydney, 1911, 47.

20. Spence, 47-8.

21. Spence, 80.

22. G.A. Wilkes, *The Stockyard and the Croquet Lawn: Literary Evidence For Australia's Cultural Development*, Arnold, Melbourne, 1981, 43-4.

23. Bret Harte, *The Luck of Roaring Camp: Complete Works of Bret Harte*, London, II, 1903, 135.

24. Lawson quotes the ballad Mary Cameron wrote on Petrie in "A Hero in Dingo Scrubs" (I 394): see Roderick, *Commentaries*, 206-9.

25. Geoffrey Dutton, *The Squatters*, Currey O'Neil, South Yarra, 1985, 112. Adrian Mitchell remarks on the "dead pan joke" of the name in *The Oxford History of Australian Literature*, ed. Leonie Kramer, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1981, 72. Lawson refers to "Tyson's cattle" in "Going Blind" (I 176).

26. Dutton, 115.

27. *New Australia*, 24 March 1894: *Collected Verse* I. 256-7. On New Australia see Lloyd Ross, *William Lane and the Australian Labor Movement* (1937) Hale & Iremonger, Sydney, 1980, and Gavin Souter, *A Peculiar People: The Australians in Paraguay*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1968.

28. Anne Cranny-Francis, "Henry Lawson and the *Labour Leader*", *Australian Literary Studies*, XI (1983) 266.

29. Roderick, *Henry Lawson: A Life*, 104-5.

30. Jack Mitchell, "Aesthetic Problems of the Development of the Proletarian-Revolutionary Novel in Nineteenth Century Britain", in *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik* (1963), reprinted in David Craig, ed., *Marxists on Literature*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1975, 245-66.

31. *Academy and Literature*, 8 March 1902, reprinted in Colin Roderick, ed., *Henry Lawson Criticism 1894-1971*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1972, 123-4. When Garnett reissued the piece in *Friday Nights: Literary Criticism and Appreciations*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1922, he omitted the passages marked by square brackets. Emile Saillens compared Lawson to Gorki in *Mercure de France*, 1 October 1910, reprinted in Roderick, *Henry Lawson Criticism*, 147.

32. Humphrey McQueen, *A New Britannia: An Argument Concerning the Social Origins of Australian Radicalism and Nationalism*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1970, revised 1976, 104-16.

33. Henry Lawson, *Joe Wilson and His Mates*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1902, 333.

34. *The Athenaeum*, no. 3907 (13 September 1902), 347.

35. *The Workingman's Paradise*, 100-1.

36. E.H. Lane ("Jack Cade"), *Dawn to Dusk: Reminiscences of a Rebel.* William Brooks, Brisbane, 1939, 48.

37. A.G. Stephens, *The Bulletin,* 29 August 1896, reprinted in *A.G. Stephens: Selected Writings,* ed. Leon Cantrell, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1977, 225. See also Brian Kiernan, ed., *Henry Lawson* (Portable Australian Authors) University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1976, xii, 120ff.

38. Roderick, *Henry Lawson: A Life,* 89-91; Gavin Souter, *A Peculiar People,* 254; R.B. Walker, *The Newspaper Press in New South Wales 1803-1920,* Sydney University Press, Sydney, 1976, 136.

39. Ken Stewart, "'The Loaded Dog': A Celebration," *Australian Literary Studies* XI (1983), 155-6.

40. *The Workingman's Paradise,* 112-3.

41. Denton Prout, *Henry Lawson: The Grey Dreamer,* Rigby, Adelaide, 1963, 125.

Chapter 2

JOSEPH FURPHY, *SUCH IS LIFE*

Joseph Furphy's *Such is Life* opens simply and clearly enough with that memorable, sardonic initial declaration:

> Unemployed at last! (1)[1]

The complex reaction of the relief from work, while at the same time the prospect of poverty and hunger; the sense of liberation, while at the same time the bitter reflection that it is only through unemployment that working men and women can ever attain the state of leisure and relaxation available to the upper classes: all this is succinctly implied. There is a lot said but not said, a lot of explanation and social observation and commentary on the economic situation.

This is not said, but it is implied. The line of full stops that immediately follows marks an excision. Already, after only three words, an excision, an absence is indicated. It is the clue that indicates that there is the unsaid, the unwritten (or unprinted), to be taken account of in this text, as well as the printed word. The row of full stops may proclaim the absent rather obviously, signposting the existence of the unsaid or the omitted. That there is an absence is not something concealed. The row of full stops often indicates an excision, a censorship authorial or editorial, moral or political or verbal. Proclaiming the existence of the excised indicates that this unwritten, this unexpressed, is no secret. It presupposes that the narrator and the readers know that a lot of things are continually suppressed and left unprinted or unsaid or

unwritten. But this does not mean that they are not there. The absent is not the unknown of the Freudian unconscious: this is not an unknown whose very unknown existence is unknown and unknowable; rather, this is a public proclamation of absence, of the unprinted. It acknowledges the convention whereby certain things are not said or not written. At this point there is not any need to be more specific than that. "Unemployed at last!" implies that the comment may be political, a comment on the economic organisation of society. The other familiar excision, of the sexual, is also potentially implied, the huge taboo of sexual expression in print.

And then after the laconic opening and the line of full stops implying excision, certainly denoting absence, a lack of words, we are presented with the stiff, verbose, rather ponderous and portentous manner:

> Scientifically, such a contingency can never have befallen of itself. According to one theory of the Universe, the momentum of Original Impress has been tending toward this far-off, divine event ever since a scrap of fire-mist flew from the solar centre to form our planet. Not this event alone, of course; but every occurrence, past and present, from the fall of captured Troy to the fall of a captured insect. According to another theory, I hold an independent diploma as one of the architects of our Social System, with a commission to use my own judgment, and take my own risks, like any other unit of humanity. This theory, unlike the first, entails frequent hitches and cross-purposes; and to some malign operation of these I should owe my present holiday. (1)

Many readers become discouraged at this point. The sheer wordiness of the narrator, the threat of continual philosophizing, the introduction of a vocabulary signalling philosophizing and abstraction rather than the expected vocabulary of fiction is unavoidable. It is an encounter with language that is promised, and not the sensuous language of literary seduction, but the abrasive, quasi-scientific, public speaking, essayist's vocabulary and structure and range of reference. It is not only this style that we encounter, however. A whole variety of dialects are recorded

— English rural, German, Scots, Chinese-pidgin — and a whole range of essayistic, philosophizing reflection, together with a variety of narrative manners as the various bullockies tell anecdotes. The wealth of verbal expression confronts the reader.

Yet at the same time there is a remarkable absence, an absence that is drawn attention to. This is the recurrent "(adj.)" used to mark a swear word not recorded. Sometimes a ponderous, arch, facetious, literary periphrasis will be introduced, reminiscent of the transmutations of eighteenth century poetic diction. (Indeed we are offered a classic piece of Augustan diction, "the finny multitudes" [344]). Mosey's swearing is characterized as "deftly weaving into his address the thin red line of puissant adjective" (5). Sometimes the missing word will be denoted by a bracketed substitute: "(irrelevant expletive)" (5).

Hartley Grattan wrote

> Collins was a bit of a Victorian and could not bring himself to write — much less print, even had the police permitted — words which occur in the conversation of the "dinkum Aussie" hardly less frequently than commas and periods on the printed page: hell, bloody and bugger. His device for indicating their occurrence is rather amusing: "You're a (adj.) liar!" "Who the (adj. sheol) do you think you're talking to?" And a bugger is an "individual" or some other commonplace.[2]

But if Tom Collins was "a bit of a Victorian" and "could not bring himself to write — much less print" these words, why is attention drawn to them by these obtrusive devices? Attention is drawn to what is inexpressible. H.J. Oliver, remarking that "Grattan completely misses the fun of the mock-modest '(adj.)', of the satire on literary convention, and of all the 'elegant variation' that is so much more amusing than mere repetition of 'hell' and 'bloody' would have been,"[3] silently drops "bugger" from Grattan's already brief list. The sexual suppression here suggests other suppressions. Barry Argyle has indicated another group.

> "Irony" has been the word on most scholars' lips; it could equally well have been "vulgarity." There is, for instance, the water tank known as Faugh-a-ballogh, which is pronounced by one bullock-driver as "Fog-a-bolla" — an approximation to what in Australian speech (lately called "Strine") would be "Fuck a bullock." Under the influence of the same accent, the name of the noxious English aristocrat, Folkstone, would become "Fuckson"; while the obsequious English peasant, "old Sollicker", who believes that "orders is orders", would be "arse-'le licker." These are isolated examples. There may well be others.[4]

Vulgarity may be Argyle's preferred term for what is happening. But there is also a literary subversion, a delight in slipping something past the editors and publishers that, had they realized it was there, they would have suppressed. The proclaimed suppressions in the "(adj.)" signal to the aware that these proclaimed upholdings of the decencies are strategic: decoys, even, so that elsewhere the constraints can be evaded.

The verbal taboos that Furphy foregrounds are examples of the huge and arbitrary system of social control embodied in language and literature. The class system with its inequalities in wealth and privilege is maintained, in part, by these verbal controls. Furphy meticulously records the varieties of spoken English. And the varieties type the speakers using them, label them, allow them to be placed in their social class: whether to be treated as swaggies and driven off or given a pannikin of flour, or admitted into the workers' shed to eat, or invited into the squatter's house. Language is directly related to social status, to work and food. Tom Collins remarks the significance of calling a meal lunch or dinner. It is as significant an ideological moment as Sir Walter Scott's discussion on Saxon and Norman, landowner or peasant, in the usages of pig and pork, sheep and mutton.

The immediate point about the suppressed words is the sexual reference of many of them. It is the sexuality that causes their suppression. And a recognition of this feature directs the

reader to the huge suppressions of sexuality in the novel. The relationship between the sexes is presented as one of absence; as absent as the absent words. Tom is trying to avoid Mrs Beaudesert; Warrigal Alf and Nosey are separated; what is foregrounded is a world of men alone, and of men meeting.

It is a deformed picture, and a deformed society that is portrayed. Furphy was totally realistic in his depiction of the destruction of the family that such itinerant work as that of the bullock drivers involves. The circumstances for the development of sustained marital, sexual or familial relationships are prevented by the economic pressures, the nature of the available work, while perceptions of sexual possibility are mediated through romantic novels such as those by Ouida. Tom, having been reading Ouida, becomes preoccupied with the erotic image of the "tawny-haired tigress" (212). The false image and suppression were the alternatives of sexual possibility. Emile Zola is mentioned, but Zola's works were regularly banned in the English-speaking world for their explosive mixture of sexuality and a sympathy for the exploited workers.

> "When I first got my swapping-book, it was by Hannah More; now it's by Zola, and smutty enough at that; it has undergone about twenty intermediate metamorphoses, and it's still going remarkably strong — in both senses of the word. Therefore I can recommend it."
>
> "I don't think it does a person any good to read Zola," remarked the boundary man gravely.
>
> "Not the slightest, Alf — that is, in the works by which he is represented amongst us. But do you think it does a person any good to read Holmes? Zola has several phases; one of them, I admit, blue as heaven's own tinct; but Holmes has only one phase, namely, pharisaism. Zola, even as we know him here in Riverina, has this advantage, that he gives you no rest for the sole of your foot — or rather, for the foot of your soul; whilst Holmes serenely seduces you to his own pinchbeck standard. Zola is honest; he never calls evil good; whilst Holmes is spurious all through. Mind you, each has a genuine literary merit of his own."
>
> "But don't you like Holmes's poetry?" asked Alf.

> "Well, his poems fill a little volume that the world would be sorry to lose; but why didn't he write one verse — just one — for the Abolitionists to quote?" (305-6)

Zola is recommended not despite but because of the sexuality: "strong ... therefore I can recommend it." From the sexuality Collins moves immediately to politics. Oliver Wendell Holmes's failure to take a radical political stance is criticized. The "genuine literary merit" that both Zola and Holmes possess is not enough. What Zola's radical stance is, of course, is never mentioned. That is even more suppressed than sexuality. But its presence there, this existence of a political component to Zola's work, is drawn attention to.

However, to talk of the absent or of suppression here is to talk of something that is not totally absent nor fully suppressed. What we have is the gesture of suppression — the substituted "(adj.)" — that draws attention to itself. Sexuality is something that is presented to us as repressed or absent, yet it is always suggestively there. Chapter three, in which Tom Collins runs through the Riverina like a naked Adam, is full of sexual innuendo.

> "Over again," said Harry calmly. "You both cheated."
> The sounds were repeated.
> "Over again. You'll have to alter your hand a bit — both of you — or we'll be here all night. Slower, this time."
> Once more the sounds were repeated; then the buggy started, and Harry's voice died away in the distance to an indistinct murmur, as he reviled the girls for this new exhibition of their shamelessness. (129)

The episodes are fragments of overheard conversation, with the visual detail left to the imagination; they are reported by Tom, the naked voyeur. The voyeur, who might be expected to be looking for nakedness, is himself the naked one here. It is one of the many reversals and role ambiguities in *Such is Life.*

The first impression of *Such is Life* is of the repression of sexuality. The characters seem primarily to be men alone. In chapter three we see that there is another world of couples, of constant sexual engagement, seductions and threats and lures. Yet this burgeoning sexuality transmutes into something else and the recurrent pattern of transexuality comes into play. An early indication of this theme is in the naming of Tom's horse, a male, Cleopatra. The horse-rider "Jim" that Tom so admires turns out to be Miss Jemima (143). Nosey Alf is gradually revealed to the reader to be a woman.

By recognizing the suppressions signalled in the verbal bowdlerizations of the "(adj.)", we are directed to the suppressed sexuality; only to find it not that suppressed at all but pervasive through the novel.

Is there, then, perhaps another suppression? Is the suppressed sexuality a distraction from a deeper suppression? The very theme of suppression is foregrounded in the language, or absent language. The theme of censorship and suppression is made conscious and demands our attention. What else is suppressed?

A.A. Phillips claimed that *Such is Life* covered "all significant aspects of Riverina life" and "each rank in the hierarchy of Wool" is represented save for the shearer; which, Phillips concedes, is a curious omission.[5]

Phillips attempted to explain this substantial omission by claiming "the events in Furphy's narrative are supposed to take place between September and March — that is, after the Riverina shearing has finished." But as John Barnes has pointed out, "the narrative of *Such is Life* begins with Tom Collins's meeting with the wool teams; on Runnymede station it is then "the thick o' the shearin'," and the presence of the shearers on the station is mentioned in conversation."[6]

The absence of the shearers is indeed a curious, even an extraordinary absence. And to Furphy's contemporaries the significance of the absence, the meaning resident in the omission, would have been readily apparent. During the 1890s the shearers were the vanguard activists of the Australian working class; the shearers were the radical unionists. Organised, militant, they

engaged in massive strike action in 1891 in Queensland and were defeated by the introduction of non-union labour protected by armed troops and special constables.[7] The strikes occurred in Queensland; the Riverina shearing season followed the Queensland season and the itinerant shearers moved through the country; but the strike was defeated before the Riverina season had begun. To say that there was no significant Riverina strike action does not explain the omission; the shearers were the same shearers. But the shearers' strike was in 1891. Furphy completed his manuscript in 1897, and placed the events back in 1883. He is writing about the period before the strikes, and writing from the later perspective of the defeat of the unions.

The absence of striking or politicised shearers can be explained through the historical setting of the novel. This raises the question, why did Furphy choose to set his novel before the strikes? Writing in the period of repression, the unions now defeated and demoralised, it would have been impossible to have found a publisher for a sympathetic portrayal of socialist shearers. Yet having set his novel in the pre-unionised period, Furphy then leaves the shearers out altogether. The exclusion is blatant, and directs us to speculate on the reasons for the absence. The implication is that since unionised, radicalised (and now defeated) shearers are inexpressible, then no shearers will be presented at all. It is an absence that forces us to a political point.

The absent political confrontation of 1891 is what the developing class feeling and resentment of exploitation in the 1880s is leading towards. That the unions had been defeated by the time of writing explains the pessimistic mood of the book's social vision. The opening "Unemployed at last!" denotes, for all its comic irony, a reality of pauperisation. By setting the book in the 1880s Furphy could avoid the organized politics, the sense of co-operation and mateship, that was to form the militant unions. He presents the demoralized, pre-unionized, pre-socialist state of affairs of the 1880s: a state of affairs that had become the situation again in the days of defeat of the late 1890s. Although political ideas are occasionally tossed around in discussion, there is no political action. That is unthinkable. This is the portrayal of

life when such political possibilities were yet to emerge, written from the standpoint of a time when they had yet again been repressed.

The absent shearers are a mark of an absence in political possibility. But this "absent" radical politics that the absent shearers denote in *Such is Life* was originally complemented by the presence of a sustained exposition of socialism. The original manuscript of *Such is Life* — 1125 pages, Furphy calculated — "made an impractical business proposal," as A.G. Stephens put it:

> Even in the low-cost days of 1897, such a book could not be produced without money losses; and, manager of the Bulletin's book-publications, I could not issue it as it lay.[8]

Furphy set about abridging and revising. He cut out the exposition of socialism by Rigby, which he then later shaped into a volume on its own. "*Rigby's Romance* is a juicy quarter of the mammoth uncovered by Joseph Furphy," Stephens wrote. It formed chapter five of the original manuscript of *Such is Life.* Furphy was unable to get Stephens to publish the book of *Rigby's Romance.* He then tried the Melbourne *Tocsin* and the Sydney *Worker,* without success. Finally it was serialized by the *Barrier Truth* under the editorship of Robert Ross in 1905. In 1921 it appeared in book form, but with the core of the exposition of socialism removed: Chapters xxxi-xxxv, and xxxvii-xxxix were omitted. Not until 1946 was the full text published.

The demoralization and disorganization and atomized individualism of the bullock drivers and swagmen and other itinerants were originally presented by Furphy in the context of a social vision that offered comradeship, cooperation, and hope. Rigby's claims were challenged; he was argued with and interrupted; his remorseless speeches are punctuated by some sardonic comments by his listeners. In his readiness to hold forth he is no different from many of the other characters of *Such is Life.* Socialism is not presented as the transcendent vision that immediately eclipses every other possibility. Instead, socialism

is presented as one of the various world views constantly proclaimed. But in its intellectual coherence, in its provision of hope, and in its clear-sighted analysis of the existing social-economic order, it offers a vision that none of the other world views can approach. Furphy offers the vision; he also presents the resistances and misunderstandings and ignorance that have to be overcome before it is accepted.

Rigby's analysis of the present social order is uncompromising and provocative.

> I tell you that from the present social system of pastoral Australia — a patriarchal despotism, tempered by Bryant and May — to actual lordship and peonage, is an easy transition, and the only thing that can prevent this broadening down is a vigorous rally of every man with a clear head and a heart in the right place. (98)

The uncritical reference to arson as a ready reprisal against the squatters — Bryant and May's matches "tempering" the "patriarchal despotism" — is as radical an account of the class war as will be found in Australian fiction. Equally clear-sighted and chilling is Rigby's vision of the fate of socialist intellectuals:

> Independent of the leaders, and apart from all organisation, there are men — intellectual giants, very frequently — behind the nefarious Socialistic movement, poisoning the public mind with aspirations for a state of things which would make life worth living. Our ancestors knew how to silence these fellows. If legal process seemed doubtful, or public execution appeared undesirable, there was a quieter way. You might have approached any one of my own Irish forefathers, furtively pointing out a superfluous individual of the Rigby type, whilst jingling a few shillings in your hand. (227)

Rigby himself is not summarily assassinated. But his political expositions make him a marked man.

> I wrote to Milligan Brothers, offering my services again, and leaving the question of wages with themselves. I had their reply

> this afternoon, written as a memo. on the corner of my letter. They decline to employ an agitator." (234)

Rigby's exposition of socialism is delivered in a wealth of wordiness; in this it is akin to the overall wordiness of *Such is Life*. But the relaxed and spacious manner allows Furphy to present the basic issues directly and clearly.

> Here, at the very outset, you're confronted by the immovable fact that superfluous wealth in one class is always synchronised by corresponding poverty in another class. The fact, as a fact, is of neutral morality. But to bring the material and moral questions into relation you will now inquire whether this disparity is for the best or for the worst. And to arrive at a true answer, you must imagine yourselves as gracing the very lowest walks of life, bearing in mind that the thing hostile to your own higher interests is equally hostile to the higher-interests of your fellow-weed. You have answered. (108)

Rigby is able to discourse on such basic issues as wealth and poverty and wage-slavery, elucidating and elaborating upon them, introducing them into the consciousness of his listeners: and so Furphy introduces them into the consciousness of his readers.

> "Now, Mr Rigby," protested the clergyman, rousing himself from the sorcerous spell of the Senator's rhetoric, "pray remember that you are speaking to Englishmen. The distinction of master and servant we cheerfully recognise; but slavery is a different matter."
>
> "True," replied the Sheriff, gently. "And the grade of the 'servant' is, in reality, much lower than that of the 'slave'. At a time when slavery was not the exclusive badge of inferior races, but stood fairly on its merits, the slave looked down on the wages man, and was entitled to do so. You will find this statement supported by all the evidence available. 'Hireling', or 'hired servant', in our translations of sacred and classical literature, is always a term of reproach; whilst 'servant' — which, in every instance, means either bondman or vassal — carries the idea of servitude with ignominy ...

We speak of the labor market, and rightly too; well, the vast majority of our fellow-citizens are chattels in that market. Playing it pretty low down on the reputed image of God — isn't it?" (114-115)

The socialism expounded is one that confronts and resists racism.[9]

"One moment, Colonel," I interposed. "Are we to understand that you State Socialists would concede freedom of entry and terms of equality to the few million coloured brothers named Sling Cat and Jamsetjee Ramchunder, who would promptly avail themselves of your system?"

"Avail themselves of our system, did you say?" mused the Sheriff. "Do inveterate and self-satisfied drunkards seek membership in Rechabite Lodges? Heaven knows, we would welcome either Chow or Baboo, provided he left himself behind. We draw no color line, no educational line, not even an intellectual line, but we fix a very distinct standard of progress-potency. These Oriental gentlemen have sold their birthright. 'In the East,' says De Quincey, 'man is a weed.' Now, man is not a weed by Nature's purpose, nor is he a weed by compulsion. Collectively — but in the first place individually — he classifies himself. If his appraisement be low, the inevitable exploiter may be trusted to keep him down to his own valuation; if he holds himself to be the temple of the living God, he will vindicate that claim — he will vindicate it as a triumphant leader — if not as an effective democrat. Millions of pseudo-Christian whites are quite as objectionable as our colored brethren, but in point of accessibility there is all the difference. For the Chow has admitted finality; the Baboo has conceded despotism; and both have got down to the husks. Yet these prodigals' manhood, though suspended, is inborn, and will assuredly assert itself at some future time. The first condition of restoration is that the prodigal must 'come to himself.' But though propagandism is worse than useless here, I repeat my argument for the initial equality of Ah Sin and Juggernaut Gunga with the best of us — an equality which, rightly understood, has never been disturbed since the yesterday when their ancestors were civilised men, and ours were howling savages, barely able to grasp the scientific fact that two wolf-skins sewed together were wider than one by itself." (212-213)

The omission of the socialist core of Furphy's vision from the text of *Such is Life* is one of the great scandals of Australian literature. That Furphy was constrained to make the omission himself, that it was in this sense "authorial", in no way lessens the scandal. It provides further evidence of the power of manipulation and mind control of the publishing industry and its advisers, confirming the novel's dark vision. But the great scandal has been the perpetuation of the exclusion; the excised socialism rates hardly a mention in the critical commentary on *Such is Life.* The deed has been done and is now conveniently forgotten. *Such is Life* survives as a prescribed text for study; but *Rigby's Romance* is ignored — and the socialist vision along with it. It may now be impossible to reconstruct the original authorial *Such is Life.* And yet since we know that *Rigby's Romance* was the original chapter Five of the novel, it is extraordinary that critical attention continues to evade its issues and implications.

Despite the excision of Rigby from *Such is Life,* there nonetheless remains a consistent political vision. For one of Furphy's recurrent themes is social class, and the economic exploitation of one class by another. It is in this context that we can most valuably interpret the endemic literary allusion to the colonial romances. The objection to these is not simply that they are the product of English writers, nor that they are "unrealistic", as commentators have tended to assume. The point is that these colonial romances are written from a remorselessly patrician or bourgeois standpoint. Furphy's literary critique is at the same time a radical, political critique.

Furphy's vision of a class society is presented not from a ruling class perspective — as in the novel he especially kicks against, Henry Kingsley's *The Recollections of Geoffrey Hamlyn* — but from a working class and lower middle class position. As A.A. Phillips wrote:

> For the first time for centuries, Anglo-Saxon writing had broken out of the cage of the middle-class attitude. Dickens, Hardy and Bret Harte had, it is true, written sympathetically and

> knowledgably of the unpossessing; but they had written for a middle-class audience. They were the guides who conducted their middle-class audience on a Cook's Tour of the lower orders. But to Lawson and Furphy, it was the middle-class who were the foreigners.[10]

Furphy is unmystified about the nature of the society. The inequalities of wealth are maintained by physical force; the police and military are there to retain the privileges of property owners.

> Without vassal loyalty, or abject vassal fear, the monopolist's sleep can never be secure. Domination, to be unassailable, must have overwhelming force in reserve — moral force, as in the feudal system, or physical force, as in our police system. (255)

But the situation has changed in the course of half a century:

> The squatter of half-a-century ago dominated his immigrant servants by moral force — no difficult matter, with a "gentleman" on one side and a squad of hereditary grovellers on the other. He dominated his convict servants by physical force — an equally easy task. But now the old squatter has gone to the mansions above; the immigrant and old hand to the kitchen below; and between the self-valuation of the latter-day squatter and that of his contemporary wage-slave, there is very little to choose. Hence the toe of the blucher treads on the heel of the tan boot, and galls its stitches. (255-56)

The class lines are now lines of conflict.

The reflections on class and property are prompted by the organization of Runnymede station. "Social status, apart from all consideration of mind, manners, or even money, is more accurately weighed on a right-thinking Australian station than anywhere else in the world" (254). There is no endorsement in Tom's use of "right-thinking"; he has already told us that he is "a little too

exalted for the men's hut, and a great deal too vile for the boss's house" (254). He offers an analogy for the class discriminations.

> In the accurately-graded society of a proper station, you have a reproduction of the Temple economy under the old Jewish ritual. The manager's house is a Sanctum Sanctorum, wherein no one but the high priest enters; the barracks is an Inner Court, accessible to the priests only; the men's hut is an Outer Court, for the accommodation of lay worshippers; and the nearest pine-ridge, or perhaps one of the empty huts at the wool-shed, is the Court of the Gentiles. And the restrictions of the Temple were never more rigid than those of a self-respecting station. (255)

This, it hardly needs to be remarked, is not presented as a social ideal. But no social ideal is presented. The attempts to set up some European feudal-squirearchical social model in Australia are not presented for endorsement. And, as Brian Kiernan points out, "The other aspect of the immigrants' dream, the hope of establishing a closely settled and self-sufficient yeoman class, is even more tellingly exposed as a delusion."[11]

The social organization of the outback station is one subject inviting political analysis, and we are provided with an anatomy of social inequality. But the action of *Such is Life* is also a political action. What consistent action is there? it might be asked; there are long conversations, disquisitions, evasions, but action seems consistently disrupted and fragmented. However, there is one consistent, recurrent, necessary daily action — finding grass and water. All flesh is grass, the Bible tells us. *Such is Life* records the daily struggle of flesh for survival. It is not a struggle against nature. The German explorers we encounter are ready for combat against the perils of the wild, and are presented as comic. They are out of touch with contemporary realities, and live in some never-never romantic historical past. The struggle Tom Collins records is the struggle for the means of survival in a world of private property. The grass is all owned by the squatters. The bullockies are necessary for carting supplies and produce, but no

provision is made for the feeding of their bullocks. There is no social cooperation. All the arguments about land ownership had been rehearsed endlessly through the decade prior to Furphy's writing his novel, but nothing has changed. For all the political activity of the early nineties, nothing has changed. The situation described in the novel's setting of the 1880s was still the situation at the time of its publication twenty years later. As J.K. Ewers put it:

> The main theme of the book is the never-ending battle between bullock-drivers looking for grass for their teams, and the squatters who owned the grass and denied them access to it. It was out of that simple situation of demand and denial that Furphy expanded and built his social philosophy ...
> A lesser writer might have confined himself to the immediate problem of his book — namely bullock-drivers versus squatters. Furphy took the problem into every aspect of national and international life when he ranged the men-of-no-property, the "have-nots" against the "haves." That is the eternal struggle.[12]

The continual, ongoing struggle for grass can be seen as a political struggle. But it is not a political gesture. It is a necessary struggle for survival, which we can interpret politically. But there is also an action of Tom's which is an archetypal act of political protest, though in this instance not political in intent. But in a novel of such consistent suppressions and evasions, the ambiguity of the act demands a political interpretation. The action is Tom's venture in rick burning, in setting fire to the straw-stack, in order to create a diversion so he can steal some clothes to cover his nakedness. "Few men, I think, have a healthier hatred of incendiarism than I have" (146), Tom tells us, revealing indirectly that he had previously caused "a bush-fire which cleaned the grass off half the county" in "trying to smoke a bandicoot out of a hollow log" (146) when a child. Again, the context was not political, not part of the class-war, not a revenge on the propertied by the unpropertied. But, as Julian Croft puts it:

> The worst crime which could be committed in colonial times was rick-burning. Not only was it a threat to survival through bad seasons, but traditionally in England rick-burning was an act of political terrorism.[13]

Tom escapes punishment but an innocent swagman, Andrew Glover, is imprisoned for three months.

Just as the shearers are absent from the novel, and so the possibility of a politicized proletariat is absent, so the political is absent from Tom's incendiarism. The shearers and union activists were accused of a number of incidents of arson in the 1891 strike — though again there is an ambiguity: at least some of these were the work of *agents-provocateurs*. To judge the motive from the action itself is to be liable to error: that is one of Furphy's points.

But though the political motive is absent, its trace is present, and the class-war assumption serves to get Andrew Glover imprisoned. Obliquely, ambiguously, evasively, a classic act of political activism, of radical reprisal, is introduced into the novel. Even though the charge is "altered to Careless Use o' Fire" (368) in order to push the case through rather than remanding a more serious charge to a higher court, the circumstantial evidence is clearly interpreted in the traditional way. "The propertied classes is at the mercy of the thriftless classes", as Mr Q- the J.P. puts it to Tom. And the sequence of events is damning for Andrew Glover:

> "I was on his place, askin' him for work, as it might be this mornin'; an' he give me rats for campin' so near his place, as it might be las' night. Seems, it was nex' mornin' his stack was burnt, jist after sunrise." (368)

As for Tom's feelings about incendiarism, for all his earlier expressed healthy hatred of it (146), his encounter with Mr Q- allows the (silent) expression of a different attitude. Mr Q- declares:

> "I been burnt out, r--p and stump, by an incendiary, when I was at Ballarat" —
>
> "Ah!" said I sympathetically, but my sympathy was with the other party — (153-154).

Tom's nakedness in this episode is also politically significant. At one level it provides a connexion between the sexual repressions and the political suppressions: we have seen him as the naked voyeur, and have read his fragmentary, allusive account of the (unexpressed) sexual carryings-on. The parallel between the inexpressible sexual and the inexpressible political is readily seen.

But the idea of the naked Adam is also a political idea. "'I'm replete with the leading trait of Adamic innocence; I want the sartorial concomitants of Adamic guilt'" (135), Tom says, demanding the trousers of the draper's assistant. And in radical rhetoric, Adam represented primal innocence before the introduction of property ownership and social caste.

> When Adam delved and Eve span
> Who was then the gentleman?

was the provocative slogan of the English Peasants' Revolt of 1381. Tom's Adamic nakedness is a potentially political image; his straw-stack burning is a potentially political act; the revenge of the unpropertied on the propertied. Amidst the oblique and elusive subtexts of *Such is Life*, we are offered here a powerful radical statement — no less powerful for its obliqueness, ambiguity and comedy.

In addition to the play with the Adamic, there is a further Furphyan joke that emphasizes its radical, indeed revolutionary political implication. In response to Mr Q-'s description of the suspect, Tom remarks

> "Your description's wonderfully correct, Mr Q-. You might, without libel, call him a sansculotte." (153)

The literal meaning of sansculotte is someone without knee-breeches. It is usually taken to mean one who wears trousers (pantalons), not knee-breeches, and as such applied, in the French Revolution, to a republican of the poorer classes in Paris, and by extension to an extreme republican or revolutionary.[14] In common English usage it is often misinterpreted as someone without breeches. The implicit play on Tom's nakedness and on the revolutionary act of rick burning are basic to Furphy's introduction of the term here.

The initial impression of *Such is Life* is of a novel of extraordinary ramshackleness. It consists of sprawling conversations, long disquisitions and meditations, and seemingly disconnected events. There are, of course, connections in the clues buried in various episodes, and part of the experience of *Such is Life* is in perceiving the way seemingly unconnected anecdotes and characters can be seen to interconnect. But the initial impression is one of disorder.

And it is a mental disorder. The range of ideas Tom Collins comes up with, on Shakespeare, on society, on the Old Testament, are not such as suggest any integration; indeed, quite the opposite. The impression is of a fragmented knowledge. Tom may be proud of his erudition. But the reader has doubts: about the accuracy of the information, about the extent of it, and about what Tom actually understands.

At one level Furphy is stressing that the working men in the outback are not stupid. They have intelligence, they read, they exchange books and ideas. But at the same time he presents the confusions, misunderstandings, and pretensions. He discourses on human knowledge and ignorance early in the novel.

> Human ignorance is, after all, more variable in character than in extent. Each sphere of life, each occupation, is burdened with its own special brand of this unhappy heritage. To remove one small section of inborn ignorance is a life-work for any man. "Ignorance, madam, pure ignorance", was what betrayed the great lexicographer into defining "pastern" as "a horse's knee." And the Doctor was right (in his admission, of course, not in his definition). Ignorance, reader, pure ignorance is what debars

> you from conversing fluently and intelligibly in several dialects of the Chinese language. Yet a friend of mine, named Yabby Pelham, can do so, though the same person knows as little of book-lore as William Shakespear of Stratford knew. But if you had been brought up in a Chinese camp, on a worn-out goldfield, your own special acquirements, and corresponding ignorance, might run in grooves similar to Yabby's. Let each of us keep himself behind the spikes on this question of restricted capability. (40)

Furphy expresses that traditional radical, working class suspicion of the privileging of book knowledge over practical knowledge.[15] He makes sure he demonstrates his own learned book knowledge with his anecdote of "the great lexicographer", "the Doctor", to show that he knows of Dr Johnson and that he can assume his readers will also know of him and will not need the name spelled out; the learned periphrasis will do. But the point is to show that even Dr Johnson could be ignorant. Even the most learned can be ignorant in the area in which their reputation for knowledge lies; the great lexicographer misdefined a word. This serves to undercut all the established upholders of knowledge. Then Furphy moves to the unlettered, unlearned ignorant outback worker who nonetheless can speak "fluently and intelligibly in several dialects of the Chinese language." And Shakespeare is brought in as the icon of the unlearned. Ben Jonson's comment that Shakespeare had small Latin and less Greek is now turned from criticism to a validation of Shakespeare as democratic hero, natural poet. Shakespeare is cited here because he is the occasion of an ideological struggle between those who would see him as an establishment writer, embodying the ruling class vision of England; and those who would see him as a radical and questioning figure. It is a debate that still continues.

Yabby Pelham has developed a practical knowledge of Chinese. The working man has the potential for knowledge and intellectual attainment, given the appropriate context and situation. Intelligence, knowledge, understanding are not the preserve of the ruling classes, though they try to present it that

way. Furphy is making a claim here for the working class access to education. It is a highly politicised position.

Nonetheless, the working class has, like all classes of humanity, its capacity for ignorance. Dan O'Connell, also known as Rory O'Halloran, is an example. The initial impression is of "an extraordinary man":

> "Speaking of Dan, as you call him," said I; "by the foot we recognise the Hercules; and if he knows as much about all other historical subjects as he does about Cawnpore and the American Presidents, he must have ripened into an extraordinary man. But then, an extraordinary man should have learned the difference between mallee and yarran in five years of solid scrub-observation." (79)

The lack of practical knowledge about mallee and yarran is the clue that his other knowledge may be narrowly based. At the end of chapter two Tom Collins visits Rory O'Halloran's hut:

> Then, not feeling sleepy, I took down one of four calico-covered books, which I had previously noticed on a corner shelf. It was my own old Shakespear, with the added interest of marginal marks, in ink of three colours, neatly ordered, and as the sand by the sea-shore innumerable. I put it back with the impression that no book had ever been better placed. The next volumes was a Bible, presented by the Reverend Miles Barton, M.A., Rector of Tanderagee, County Armagh, Ireland, to his beloved parishioner, Deborah Johnson, on the occasion of her departure for Melbourne, South Australia, June 16, 1875. The third book was a fairly good dictionary, appendixed by a copious glossary of the Greek and Roman mythologies. The fourth was Vol. XII of Macmillan's Magazine, May to October, 1865.
>
> Opening the latter book at random, I fell upon a sketch of Eyre's expedition along the shores of the Great Australian Bight. In another place was a contribution entitled "A Gallery of American Presidents." The next item of interest was an account of the Massacre of Cawnpore. And toward the end of the volume

> was a narrative of the Atlantic Telegraph Expedition. Of course, there were thirty or forty other articles in the book, but they were mostly strange to me, however familiar they might be to Rory.
>
> Hopeless case! I thought, as I blew out the lamp and turned into my comfortable sofa-bed. If this morepoke's Irish love of knowledge was backed by one spark of mental enterprise, he might have half a ton of chosen literature to come and go on. And here he is, with his pristine ignorance merely dislocated. (95-96)

Tom moralizes about the revealed limitations and boundaries of Rory O'Halloran's knowledge. But when Tom moralizes, we need to be aware. He may be seeing accurately in part, but there is a larger picture that he often misses. His failure to identify Nosey Alf as a woman is the striking example of this: he records with scrupulous realistic accuracy Nosey Alf's behaviour and living environment, fulfilling all the virtues of realistic observation, but he still misses the point.

The episode of Rory O'Halloran's fragmentary sources of information leaves us worrying about the basis of our own knowledge, and of human knowledge generally. Tom's range of reference is larger than Rory O'Halloran's; but is it any less ramshackle, fragmented, incoherent, arbitrary? Isn't one's own acquaintance with the records of human thought similarly glancing, partial and random in the context of the potential totality? Indeed, isn't the whole foundation of our cultural tradition equally scrappy? How much of classical literature is lost, how much of Elizabethan literature has survived; and of what has survived, how much is forgotten or ignored or left inaccessible?

By the time Furphy was writing, the impossibility of comprehending all the world's knowledge had become apparent. The expansion of empire had meant that the entire cultural traditions of the east had come into view, shaking the assumed priority and uniqueness of the Greek and Roman classics. The developments in scientific and technological thought had gone far beyond the grasp of any one individual: and a practical knowledge

now required an intense specialization. The pretence of comprehending and commanding a totality could no longer survive.

We can see this sense of collapse in *Such is Life*. All that survives and endures in practice consists of a few fragments. There is the well annotated Shakespeare, ever ready source of quotation. But the quotations are becoming trivial, like "Go to 't." The habit of quoting to adduce authority survives. But increasingly what is quoted is the marginal. The recurrent Shakespearian quotations create a sense of fragmentation as much as suggesting a cultural coherence.[16]

Such is Life portrays Australia in the making. But at the same time Australia in the making is part of the British empire, one of the outreaches of empire. And the emptiness, ramshackleness, randomness begins to evoke a sense of collapse. The centre cannot hold. As much as a picture of the making of a new society, Furphy presents a vision of cultural collapse.

Tom Collins certainly knows a lot. But a lot of the knowledge he has is pretty well useless baggage. It is the absurdity of factual "general knowledge" and specialist information, random and disconnected for all his attempts at creating world encompassing totalities, that is our overall impression. It is inert knowledge, not applied to any theory, delivering nothing. It is the reified fact of master-mind quizzes, a travesty of true knowledge, a reduction of true knowledge to trivia. A distraction from true understanding, Tom's information serves to entrap him. Furphy clearly recognizes the trap, and the seductive appeal; the autodidactic impulse, and the wastefulness of a society that finds no place for the speculative intelligence of most of its members, preferring to leave them untrained, incoherent, impotent.

The transcendent speculations on responsibility and destiny and fate are in large part evasions of reality. Chapter three offers a comic example. Having settled on a date in his diary that involves the embarrassing story of losing his clothes, Tom delays entering on the episode by launching into an eight page account of his thoughts while smoking a pipe; eight pages, a large part of the point of which is to mark the avoidance of entering into the

embarrassing narrative. Here thought, reverie, is foregrounded as evasion. Tom's speculations serve as an ideology, an organizing scheme of explanation that evades the realities. The very transcendental impulse of his speculations — set amidst yet trying to transcend the mire and materiality, the realistic detail of Tom's daily experience — indicates their inadequacy. This is false, would-be bourgeois philosophy, as mystifying as the romantic bourgeois novels Tom sees through. The socialism expounded by Rigby marks the contrast with its applied theory and the relation of theory to practice — contrasted with the rambling speculations Tom offers.

What we are offered is a sustained vision of alienation. Tom Collins is the alienated intellectual. Neither one of the bullockies nor one of the landowning class, he is a member of the proletariat who has entered the *petitebourgeoisie*, the world of the government official, and finds only competition and alienation; ultimately he loses his job altogether. His theories, his meditations, are desperately dissociated from life; his interpretations are consistently wrong. The very language of thought, of his philosophizing, is disconnected from the language of men, from the idiom of the bullock drivers. The tonal ruptures are huge, extraordinary, aesthetically subversive.

But the language of men is anyway presented as a tower of Babel. Furphy offers us meticulous transcriptions of the accents and dialects of Scots, Germans, English countryfolk, Chinese and Aboriginals. The incomprehensibility of much of this reported speech, the tedium of it, the reader's recoil from the effort of struggling to decode and understand it, the boredom of the passages, the recourse to skip-reading — these consequences of Furphy's laborious and minute details of representation, establish a world of mutual incomprehensibility. Of course there is some communication; there is not total incomprehensibility. But what is foregrounded is the confusing and obscuring factors in these varieties of speech. Division rather than solidarity is what is represented.

The bullock drivers represent the process of accruing material wealth — not for themselves, but for the squatters and merchants and shareholders. Yet at the same time the long treks, empty tracks, desultory campfire conversations look forward to the vision of a wasteland in Samuel Becket's *Waiting for Godot:* metaphysical speculations and meaningless fragments representing humanity *in extremis,* a vision of crisis and collapse. This is the aspect of *Such is Life* that H.P. Heseltine stressed:

> Society is an act, a decent bluff, which makes bearable the final emptiness, the nothingness of the honestly experienced inner life. "Nothing" is the last word of one of the central classics of our literary heritage; and it is a word which echoes and re-echoes throughout our literature.[17]

And Heseltine went on explicitly to oppose this vision to any socialist reading:

> The canon of our writing presents a facade of mateship, egalitarian democracy, landscape, nationalism, realistic toughness. But always behind the facade looms the fundamental concern of the Australian literary imagination. That concern, marked out by our national origins and given direction by geographic necessity, is to acknowledge the terror at the basis of being, to explore its uses, and to build defences against its dangers.[18]

But this vision of fragmentation and alienation and confusion is not the final picture. Rigby's exposition of socialism, of a progressive and coherent account of the world, is there to stand against it. Out of the rubble and chaos and division emerges a visionary possibility. The portrayal of hopelessness and collapse is not the ultimate picture; that is the detritus of the old order from which the socialist future will emerge. Amidst the muddle and misunderstanding and ignorance and exploitation stands the hopeful possibility of another way of life.

But the socialist exposition was excised from *Such is Life,* and what we are left with is the analysis of collapse without the

dialectic of renewal. Socialism is now an absence in the published text. There are hints of a socialist vision; but the full exposition is excised. And so Professor Wilkes can write:

> The strongest "philosophic" impression given by *Such is Life* is an impression of scepticism and stoicism. There is no positive view put forward which is not qualified in some way, humorously deflated, or exhibited ironically. One hypothesis conflicts with another, or is found to collide with the facts.[19]

But of course the positive was socialism. And though Rigby's positive was subject to humorous deflation and irony from his audience, nonetheless it emerged as the only coherent position amidst the muddle and confusion. As R.G. Howarth wrote of the material issued as *Rigby's Romance:*

> The book takes the form of a symposium, men of many shades of opinion, many varieties of experience, being gathered about a Master who expounds to them the doctrine of the time — and the future.[20]

And this symposium, this exposition, was in the contemporary mode of the novel of ideas. Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward 2000-1887* (1887), William Morris's *News From Nowhere* (1890) and William Lane's *The Workingman's Paradise* (1893) all contain this central exposition of socialist thought.[21] This was the tradition in which Furphy wrote, and to which he properly belongs.

1. All quotations from [Joseph Furphy], *Such is Life, Being Certain Extracts from the Diary of Tom Collins,* Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1903.

2. C. Hartley Grattan, "About Tom Collins", afterword to *Such is Life*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1948, 381.

3. H.J. Oliver, "Lawson and Furphy", in Geoffrey Dutton, ed., *Literature of Australia*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1964, 302.

4. Barry Argyle, *An Introduction to the Australian Novel*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1972, 202.

5. A.A. Phillips, *The Australian Tradition: Studies in a Colonial Culture*, F.W. Cheshire, Melbourne, 1958, 20.

6. John Barnes, "The Structure of 'Such is Life'", *Meanjin* 15 iv (1956) 347-89, reprinted in C.B. Christesen, ed., *On Native Grounds*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1968, 47.

7. H. Kenway, "The Pastoral Strikes of 1891 and 1894" in D.J. Murphy, R.B. Joyce and Colin A. Hughes, eds., *Prelude to Power: The Rise of the Labour Party in Queensland 1885-1915*, Jacaranda, Brisbane, 1970; Stuart Svensen, *The Shearers' War: The Story of the 1891 Shearers' Strike*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1989.

8. A.G. Stephens, preface to the DeGaris edition of 1921, in Tom Collins [Joseph Furphy], *Rigby's Romance*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1946, xi-xii. (All quotations from this edition.)

9. This argument is called "ingenious" and "sophistry" in Julian Croft, *The Life and Opinion of Tom Collins: A Study of the Works of Joseph Furphy*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1991, 239.

10. A.A. Phillips, 38.

11. Brian Kiernan, *Images of Society and Nature: Seven Essays on Australian Novels*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1971, 14.

12. John K. Ewers, *Tell the People!* Currawong, Sydney, 1943, 19. See also Argyle, 183-4; Croft, 127-33.

13. Croft, 101; he cites Alan Atkinson, "Four Patterns of Convict Protest", *Labour History*, 39 (1979) 28-51.

14. *Oxford English Dictionary*.

15. Cf. *The Law of Freedom in a Platform* (1651) in Gerrard Winstanley, *The Law of Freedom and Other Writings*, ed. Christopher Hill, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1973, 364-5.

16. But see R.S. White, *Furphy's Shakespeare*, Centre for Studies in Australian Literature, Perth, 1989.

17. H.P. Heseltine, "The Literary Heritage", *Meanjin*, 21 i (1962) 35-49, reprinted in *On Native Grounds*, 8.

18. *On Native Grounds*, 15.

19. G.A. Wilkes, *The Stockyard and the Croquet Lawn*, Edward Arnold, Melbourne, 1981, 85.

20. Foreword to *Rigby's Romance* (1946) ix.

21. On Furphy's reading of the socialist classics, see John Barnes, *The Order of Things: A Life of Joseph Furphy*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1991, 148-9. John K. Ewers' *Tell the People!* provides a convenient selection from Furphy's social philosophy.

Chapter 3

CHRISTINA STEAD
SEVEN POOR MEN OF SYDNEY

When Christina Stead's *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* appeared in 1934 the dominant themes of Australian writing were rural, the characteristic settings were the country, the bush and the outback. There had, of course, been poems and fiction written about the cities; it isn't the case that there were no urban materials. Henry Lawson had written powerfully about urban poverty in a series of stories set in "Jones' Alley" in the 1890s and had begun his career with the powerful urban ballads "Faces in the Street" and "The Army of the Rear." William Lane's *The Workingman's Paradise* described urban conditions in Sydney in the 1890s. But the received impression is of a literature devoted to perpetuating the outback myth of Australia, even though the population was predominantly urban.[1] *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* can be seen as a work confronting and challenging this outback myth.

At the same time Stead's urban project was very much in accord with the powerful trends in world fiction. From Balzac's Paris of the 1830s and 1840s and Dickens' London of the 1850s and 1860s a strong tradition of recording the nature of urban life had been established; indeed, of life specifically in the large urban metropolis, the capital or major city. The same concern could be found in the avant-garde modernist writing of the twentieth century — James Joyce's celebration of Dublin in *Ulysses* (1922), Louis Aragon's *Le Paysan de Paris* (1926).

So Christina Stead had a myth to react against (the outback as representative of Australia), a tradition to participate in (Balzac, Dickens), and an avant-garde modernist achievement to suggest ways of making it new. In writing about Sydney she is creating a new world, a new myth to replace or complement the outback myth; and she is making a personal and a national assertion in putting Sydney on the fictional map. As H.M. Green put it in a strangely begrudging way:

> Yet *Seven Poor Men,* incomplete and one-sided, uncharacteristic of any country as is the life that it presents, was yet somehow the first novel to convey an impression of Sydney as a world city, one of the foci of world life.[2]

Stead's implicit claim is that Sydney is as worthy a site for fictional enshrinement as any other world city; it supports sufficient complexity of life, its settings are as representative and evocative as Paris or London for fiction. The city itself becomes like a character. There is no single hero or heroine, no one figure is given preference; rather, we are offered a collectivity of characters; and what holds them together is their poverty, their familial and work and personal interrelationships, their ideological discussions and explorations, and the city.[3]

The novel opens with three paragraphs of geographical scene setting: "The hideous low scarred yellow horny and barren headland lies curled like a scorpion in a blinding sea and sky. At night, house-lamps and ships' lanterns burn with a rousing shine, and the headlights of cars swing over Fisherman's Bay" (1).[4]

In the 1920s, when the novel is set, South Head was still something of an outpost and Watson's Bay ("Fisherman's Bay" Stead calls it) was a fishing and commuter village. But it is, for all the barren headland, part of the urban influence as the house and car lights indicate. The immediate impression is a negative one: "hideous." The terms are persistently negative — hideous, scarred, barren, scorpion, blinding. The first paragraph goes on to describe the military camp, a menacing presence. "It was, and remains, a military and maritime settlement" (1).

I once took a literary critic out to Watson's Bay to show him the settings of this novel and the later *For Love Alone,* and he was surprised to see that there actually is a military camp at the entrance to the heads. He had read it as symbolic. Now to read it as symbolic is, of course, exactly what is intended. Militarism was not a positive in Stead's notation; the nightmarish account of World War I in Michael Baguenault's pre-suicide horrors in chapter 8 makes that quite unambiguous. The camp is there as a symbol of repression — military, political, social. There is no later narrative point made of the military settlement. The images of military presence are part of a thematic or tonal argument.

> When the gunners are in camp, searchlights sweep over the bay all night ... in the daytime, when the red signal is flown over the barracks, the plates and windows rattle with the report of guns at target practice. (1)

In the midst of life there is this constant reminder of death; ostensibly we live in a time of peace, but the images of war and preparedness for war are there from the beginning. The war we see is the class war, the struggles of the seven poor men in their poverty, the political confrontations (in their varying degrees of commitment) of the socialists and communists with the imperialist capitalist society. The Folliots may be political dilettantes but Tom Winter ends up gaoled "on a charge of sedition, inciting to riot, etc, for a speech he made to seamen at the Union's offices" (283). We are not given Winter's speech (though we hear some of his ideas and their expression). The novel focuses on the individual consciousnesses rather than on dramatic action. But in the background there is a seamen's strike. There is a federal policeman investigating Montagu for participation in drug importing. These things are only touched on, like the military camp. But cumulatively they serve to establish a context of Sydney as a representative city of the modern capitalist world, with all those familiar components: military preparedness, poverty of the working people, financial chicanery, international drug dealing, and political repression.

The military camp is present in the novel to establish themes, symbolic within the fictional structure. But it is also indisputably real; it is there. Christina Stead was amused at the assumption that it was a fiction since the whole basis of her art was realistic. She commented:

> About the South Head military camp — alas! It seems to me, without extensive research, that Australian critics, some of them, are much more closely and stickily settled in Laputa than any other critics in the world. And in a land which IS reality and talks only of reality! Why is that? Fancy an inhabitant of Sydney not knowing what is on South Head. But when *Seven Poor Men* appeared a Sydney critic (though born in Ireland and that may be an excuse) contended that I was crazy (or romantic) when I said sailing ships bearing timber came in through the Heads "surely it happened many years ago but not now." Sad for him — my family at Boongarre and I saw them first outside (looking from The Gap and then coming into the Harbour) — I think they were from S. America — waterlogged to the gunwales — but of course afloat. But the thing that does interest me in critics' reports is that they do in fact live in a world of fantasy. It is the writers who are the scientists. (Painters, too perhaps. I remember always that I thought certain roses I saw in Chinese paintings were artists' fantasies until I saw the identical sort of rose in the Bagatelle gardens in Paris (outside Paris); and the curious hills in Flemish painting I thought imaginative, fictive, till I learned those hills existed (but were imported and built), and Chinese hills were fictive, till I saw photographs quite recently of such a geological formation in Vietnam, and I even thought (in Australia) that the white houses in Paris, Toulon and elsewhere were rather anaemic artists' dreams — till I saw them, in Toulon and Paris; and I thought the dreamy watery stretches of the Low Countries were feeble dreams — till I saw them! So now it becomes me little to criticise critics! Alas, the scornful realist.[5]

Christina Stead portrayed the settings she knew, drew on the characters she knew. The point is not to oppose the realistic to the symbolic, not to see a literary work as one or the other, imagination or history. For Stead, as for so many other great writers, the point was to discover the themes and symbols in the

reality: to read the actuality, to interpret it, to see its meanings. Etymologically the word "invent" comes from discover, come upon; inventing is not a matter of "making it up" but of discovering the meaning of what is all around. The idea of fiction as an autonomous world, a world of pure fiction, was utterly alien to Stead's vision.

And so we get the vivid, authentic recording of Sydney's geographical and social particularity. There are those powerful descriptions of the university, for instance, in chapter 6. Initially we see it through Joseph Baguenault's distant, awed vision.

> He still thought of the University grandly mounted, as on horseback, in Camperdown, as a kind of holy place, holy and exciting. Things happened there that amounted to the legendary. There was the famous young surgeon who died, who lectured before European congresses, almost at Joseph's age. There was Pumblecherri, the wild art lecturer, who was allowed to lecture though drunk; there was Garnet Gotham, who had been a father to the students in his little round-tower room and had been kicked out for having a mistress, so they said, but really, it was whispered, for being a Communist. Was it possible, a professor? Their heads, too, are like little round-tower rooms and no one knows what goes on inside. (164-5)

The image of the University grandly mounted as on horseback establishes that elevated, ruling-class position: probably not without some sexual implication possible in the "mounted," since we go on to the professor dismissed for having a mistress (which in effect was what happened to Christopher Brennan). We are shown these mythical figures through Joseph's awed response; but importantly even his awe, even his feelings of distance and exclusion, are not crudely mystified. The dismissal for having a mistress is perceived by Joseph and no doubt others in the society as the cover story for getting rid of a Communist. The harassment Stead and her husband were to experience for their Communism is recorded in Chris Williams' biography.[6]

Towards the end of the chapter when Joseph gets to the University this mythic vision, the little round-tower room

evoking Milton's hermetic philosopher in "Il Penseroso" and the colloquial "ivory towers", yet physically there in the quadrangle at Sydney university, is replaced by one of mud and raw clay and wind and rain.

> They alighted at the University steps, near the Men's Union, and tramped along cuttings and new roads past the Teachers' College ... They squelched through the fat clay ruts and grass. There were lights in the Medical School and a faint glow in the Fisher Library still. Out here the wind raged, the rain ran down into their socks and their necks, and streaked their uncut hair. The trees lashed about and the few lamps tossed on their stalks. Frogs croaked in the basement of the Teachers' College and in the University Oval. Faint lights gleamed, as in castles over the bog, in the Methodist and Presbyterian Colleges. They fought their way over the cinder-paths and marsh leaning against the wind, towards the new Physics Building. (181)

Again, the recording of reality is literal and detailed. But it is also like one of the stages of the journey in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. They are heading for enlightenment — indeed a lecture on light — but the passage indicates some of the deluding, illusory lights around: "faint lights gleamed, as in castles over the bog".

So Stead establishes the physical environment, and the legends accreting to it. This is an important part of commemorating a society: it fulfils a social need, the writer in describing a place gives it a mythic significance that often attracts years later the crowd of pilgrims and tourists. But this is not merely, not restricted to being, a geographical or architectural account. It is that, but more than that it creates a memorable picture, romantic, mythic, symbolic, even sardonic and satiric. And it is a dynamic portrayal; the initial high-flown expectations are replaced by the muddy boggy undercutting; and that too in its turn is followed and so qualified by the account of the actual lecture that follows, which adds a further richness and complexity to the episode.

One of the famous episodes of the modernist novel that made such an impact on literary Europe, James Joyce's *Ulysses* of 1922, was the nighttown sequence. Christina Stead does not

replicate Joyce; she is not amongst those novelists using stream of consciousness techniques. But the night life episodes are part of a literary tradition. The Paris of Balzac and Flaubert includes prostitution as one of its components. Within the Australian tradition William Lane includes prostitution in his portrait of Sydney in *The Workingman's Paradise*, and Henry Lawson has an early poem about a prostitute. Stead has a long, sustained passage participating in the tradition.

> The lights were on dimly to light a little the interior dusk and still to admit what remained of the daylight; the street was not yet that covered way which is endless and mysterious at night, but the city had become warm, hospitable, a city of hearths and yellow-silk lighted interiors; spoons clapped on soup-plates, spoons clanked in cups, sugar-basins revolved. An old man out walking with a cane looked friendlily at the two boys, with the friendliness of a Biblical comment, "Look, what you are experiencing the prophets experienced in their adolescence two thousand years ago." He went stooping on. I am young, thinks Jo. This is what the old man intended him to think. The street-lights were switched on and glowed warmly in a slight thick dusk, as if to prove conclusively that the day had knocked off work and gone home. Near an old garden, he noticed how the trees had taken on an inhuman air with something wild in them, as lions have, sitting unreconciled in the back of their cages licking their paws, in the zoo. He heard again the tapping behind him of the nocturnal prostitute just beginning her beat: fresh, odorous, with shining curls and a big bow on her neck and frilled elbows, pretty, dainty. She smiled unconsciously as she tapped with vanity past him. More soft steps and, rubbersoled, came the lamp-lighter who had just got through the district of gas-lamps. Tea was preparing everywhere; night had begun. (122)

The city is the character, the subject here. *Seven Poor Men* is not trapped by the demands of narrative action. The setting, the ambience, was not "background" but itself part of the very subject of the novel. To focus on characterisation or plot is to miss the further complexities and richness that fiction offers. These may seem peripheral to the narrative rush of who does what when; but

it is often in the peripheral, or apparently peripheral, that the writer has the freedom from the oppression of the narrative, from "advancing the action", to introduce other possibilities.

In throwing out the "Dear Reader" convention of eighteenth and nineteenth century fiction, the modernists also threw out one possibility of talking about ideas, of discussing themes, of talking about the presented material and its issues. At the point that critical discussion of English and American literature began on a large and institutionalised scale, critical discussion of ideas began to be deemed improper in the novel.

Stead was never a writer who participated in this exclusion of ideas. *Seven Poor Men* is full of political and social discussions. At the same time as her inclusion of discussions, however, she also exploited the modernist strategy of the indirect introduction of ideas through image, symbol and setting. Here she makes use of the tradition of representing the city as a way of inserting a set of ideas into the novel. Joseph's walk gives us an initial external view; later we have an episode with Michael Baguenault and Tom Withers in a brothel; it is displaced from the chronological moment when they go off together, and recurs in Michael's delirium when he has broken into the Folliots' house.

> Two women came to him and beckoned him to his feet; it seemed Withers was laughing behind him on the divan. Michael plucked their arms, they all ran about the room. They clustered round him again, and he invited them to drink. Although he poured out three glasses, the women did not drink, so he had to drink the wine for them. He poured out wine again, and this time they drank, but they only drank with him; they would not sip it till he raised it to his own lips. There was a murmur of laughter from the piano under his hands. Someone played the tune of an obscene song, somewhere out of sight he knew a girl was sitting on a soldier's knee, pulling his ear affectionately. He knew that on the wall was a mirror festooned with gilt and decorated with paper roses, and on the ceiling was now Leda and the swan. He didn't care for obscenity. He was engaged in watching the eyes of the two women, who would certainly go away if he did not insist on them staying, by staring

> at them through the palm of his hand. They were very voluptuous women and only lightly dressed. (230)

Prostitution has its specific resonance in Marxist thought. The *Communist Manifesto* declared:

> On what foundation is the present family, the bourgeois family, based? On capital, on private gain. In its completely developed form this family exists only among the bourgeois. But this state of things finds its complement in the practical absence of the family among proletarians, and in public prostitution.
>
> It is self-evident that the abolition of the present system of production must bring with it the abolition of the community of women springing from that system, i.e. of prostitution both public and private.[7]

And prostitution features in Karl Marx's reference to Australia in *Capital.* It is a reference that put Australia on the international map of literary allusion, inscribing it in international discourse. Marx wrote:

> The shameless lavishing of uncultivated colonial land on aristocrats and capitalists by the Government, so loudly denounced even by Wakefield, has produced, especially in Australia, in conjunction with the stream of men that the gold-diggings attract, and with the competition that the importation of English commodities causes even to the smallest artisan, an ample "relative surplus labouring population," so that almost every mail brings the John's news of a "glut of the Australian labor-market," and prostitution in some places there flourishes as wantonly as in the London Haymarket.[8]

The novel's exploration of the theme of poverty necessarily involves this inclusion of prostitution as one of its aspects. This is not part of the explicit discourse, but it is no less effective for that. We need have no doubt about the thematic significance for Stead. Her novel about the corruptions of capitalist finance, *House of All Nations,* was named after a well-known Parisian brothel.

Poverty is one of the major themes of the novel, as the title indicates, *Seven Poor Men of Sydney.* Indeed we can see it as the major organizing theme that provides, along with the portrayal of Sydney, the novel's coherence and unity. It is a range of poverties that Stead explores. At one extreme we find the frequent references to the homeless, to the tramps sleeping in the Domain (266). Part of a literary tradition (the homeless in the Domain are recorded by Robert Louis Stevenson and by William Lane),[9] they are also a painful reality. An extreme condition, it is not one that the novel's characters are exempt from; more than one of them sleeps out of doors at some point in the novel. At the more prosperous end of poverty is Gregory Chamberlain, the owner of the printing works who, by the novel's end, has lost his business, his wife, his daughter and his possessions. He is listed as one of the seven poor men.

The destructive effects of poverty are everywhere apparent. Joseph is constantly ringed by a gang of children who jeer at his poor clothing.

> He looked at himself between his hands. The sole of one boot was attached by a hair-pin, the worn knees of the trousers showed the colour of his pale skin when he sat down. His hat was an old one of his cousin's. The rest of his attire fell in with these items and produced a sort of harmonious costume, the uniform of misery. The children of Fisherman's Bay shouted after him, "Joey, Jo, Jo, Ullo Jo," when he went past in the evenings. He knew what this song meant; it meant, "You are rubbish thrown out by men, and we are not allowed to play with you, no one even has a salvage interest in you." The Clown of the Universe had produced a man in his image. The accumulated misery, shame, hunger and ignorance of centuries straddled the path as he advanced against the evening sun, and they shrieked with laughter to see his hat getting taller in the new lamplight and his coat more uncouth as his shadow fell backwards towards them. (96)

Catherine Baguenault ends up "in a shelter in a very poor section":

> Lying on the bench, at rest, because with the lowest and lost, with the degraded, unambitious and debauched, Catherine reviewed her life. (214)

Tom Winter

> was thin, ill-looking, poor; his face gave him thirty-five years of labour, but his voice and manner showed him to be only twenty-five, or even less. (123)

And the experience of poverty is described not only externally, but with a powerful sense of its human indignities:

> Joseph came up the place this spring morning taking short steps and putting his feet down flat to hide the holes in his soles, with legs slightly apart so that the trouser-cuffs should not be further rubbed, but doing this as a matter of habit and all the time glancing up at the blue sky over the new bank buildings. (71)

The poverty and the restrictions it imposes are emphasized by the freshness of Spring and the blue morning; and underlined by the contrasting presence of "the new bank buildings." On the next page Joseph "bought a packet of used razor-blades for twopence." (72)

Baruch Mendelssohn lives in the slums of Woolloomooloo:

> The dwellings on the borders of the hot asphalted pavement were holes in which moved dimly a world of heaving bosoms, gasping mouths, fanning arms. There were visible black-socked feet and bare feet in slippers, bare arms starting upwards from a bush of black hair at the armpit; locks "straight as candles" hung wet and tangled, hairy men's breasts gaped in the vees of open work-shirts. The oil-lamps or gas-jets lighted corsets and stockings carelessly thrown on beds, discoloured with sweat and dirt. The rancid breeze blew in from the wharves with the smell of weeds grown on the piles, beer from the saloons, rotten vegetables from the garbage tins. (139)

But as well as the economic deprivation of poverty, Stead establishes the effects on consciousness.

> There was scarcely any furniture in Baruch's room, but on the small pine table were papers for drawing, and inks. There he sat early in the evening, breathing seriously over some small black-and-white design, the margin scribbled with faces, legends and monograms. But it was just as likely that he would be miserably stretched out on his bed in his outdoor clothes. The rarity of his bursts of energy, due to his thin purse and bad food, seemed to syllabicate the sentence of a hopeless fate. He had a wide and wandering vision which showed him all kinds of miseries more than physical, the self-deception of vanity unapplauded, drudgery unrewarded, the mind which for recompense kneels to the tintinnabulating priesthood, the symbolist, sick and sunless for ever, the tempestuous who leap from brink to brink and the thin ambitious who wrench their hearts out to put one idea on foot in their lifetime, and those who are for ever in the green-sickness of an unrequited love or desire, and those who work out new-fangled systems to detect fate in her workings, those who are swollen with pride and those who creep in their dejection. He was so wretched to see these people swarming around him, with all these evils added to their burden of poverty, that he often fell into a fever, and this idea was with him, day and night, that he was obliged to relieve them in some way. But he hardly knew in what way. He lived by choice among the sordid southern lives of the native and immigrant poor to get himself impregnated with this fever so that it would never leave him. (140)

A major part of Stead's concern is the distortion and limitation of consciousness consequent upon poverty, and upon the social system that creates and depends upon that poverty for many and privilege for a few. There is a brief vignette of Joseph's mother and the circumscription of her life. It is a sympathetic portrait. It is not contemptuous or sneering of Mrs Baguenault; she is presented as a victim of her social environment, deprived of education, deprived of information.

> She was a plain woman. Hearing her speak, the tongue clung to the palate and the throat whirred, one's own ideas dried up, in

> sympathy. That was the effect of a dull youth, a devout life, an intelligence developed between smoky kitchen-walls, a slow remastication of ancient events to amuse the long tediums. Sixty years of poverty had extinguished that fountain of life which lives in infant flesh and ejects experiment and improvisation out of the mouth. The cheap print which hung over the piano showing Jesus with his sacred heart, in three colours out of register, blood, thorns, a nightgown, worn hands and tears, represented her own life as she knew it and as she was not ashamed to record it. Then, she went to church to know what was going on in the world, to know what view to take, as people used to go to panoramas; bad paintings artificially lighted in a little round hall, to find out what the country was like that lay about them. She saw the workaday world through a confessional grille, as a weevil through the hole he has gnawed in a nut. It might have opened to the thrust, that grille, if she had had the will, or if her husband had had the patience to teach her; but he had not, he thought too little of her brains. (65-6)

Her plight as a proletarian is intensified by her plight as a woman; her husband "thought too little of her brains" to enter on discussion. The image of the weevil chewing its way out of a nut is sardonic, but it is important to stress that Stead is never sneering at her poor and deprived characters. The poverty of cultural possibility and of cultural representation (the cheap print), the circumscription of ideas by the reactionary Roman Catholic church, this imposed limitation on the possibility of human understanding, is as much Stead's theme as the immediate physical poverty. The minds as well as the bodies are being starved and deformed. It is in this context that we are presented with Joseph's attempts to reach into the educational or cultural spheres: hence his visit to the adult education lecture at the university.

In this context we can see Kol Blount's paralysis as a type of the paralysis created by poverty in all the realms of these characters' lives. Poverty deforms the physical life, the intellectual, the mental, the spiritual, the sexual. The paralysis of poverty prevents growth and development in all these areas. Moreover, Kol's paralysis is a direct consequence of the social

system; because of his mother's poverty he has not received proper medical treatment; by the end of the novel Baruch tells Catherine

> I understand they are going to make an experimental case out of him in one of the hospitals. A Macquarie Street doctor thinks he can be cured. He should never have been in a chair all these years, it seems; a pure case of neglect and poverty. (310)

It is no fairy tale happy ending; there is no certainty Kol will be cured. If he is, it will be through offering himself as an experimental case: the destiny of the poor. Economic and class discriminations are always firmly recorded and in place in Stead's writing. The chance of a cure is a possibility that is given; but it is also stressed that it is only because of poverty that he was not treated properly originally.

The effect of Stead's account of the omnipresent poverty and the distortions consequent in her characters' psyches could have been deeply depressing. Indeed, in part the novel is depressing in this way. But it is not unrelievedly so. *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* was published in 1934, the year the concept of socialist realism was promulgated in the Soviet Union. The concept had been one of a number of theories of socialist art in discussion before it was finally adopted as official policy. Stead's first novel, in its conscious refusal of a negative ending, in incorporating the possibilities of hope and continuity, indicates her role as a pioneer of socialist art, rather than of the nihilistic, negatively oriented aesthetic of most modernism.

Michael Baguenault's suicide is significantly not given the climactic place in the novel. To have ended with that would indeed have suggested that there was no way out, no hope, no possibility, and Michael's choice could have been taken as one valid for any of the other characters. But Stead carefully places the sequence of events. Michael's death is one response to the world, but it is not privileged as in any way an especially representative or even satisfactory one.

The novel ends instead with its focus on Joseph, on someone continuing, not running away or giving up or going mad, but someone at last falling in love, planning a future. It is a bleak picture that

we are offered. But at least Joseph refuses to give up; he represents a continuing, humane life force. Joseph tells Baruch:

> "Through listening to you and Winter I know where I stand."
>
> "You have found that out. Is it worth knowing?"
>
> "Yes; I'm not a missionary like Winter, nor an intellectual like you, understanding every step I make. That must be queer, though, to know what you are doing. I'm not selfish and scheming like Withers, and not a straw in the wind like Michael. I don't get into dramas and excitement like everybody else."
>
> "What are you, Joseph?"
>
> "This is how I think of it. I'm a letter of ordinary script. Events are printed with me face downwards. I will be thrown away when I am used up and there will be an 'I' the less. Noone will know. The presses will go on printing; plenty more have been made to replace me. History is at a standstill with me. That is what I am. I see my life, after all; I know what I am doing, too, in my way. Even you and Winter don't see yours as I see mine. But I realise everything is against me, as my smallness and oddness show. There are — as they say in the Bible — hierarchies and hierarchies over me economically and intellectually, and I shall never rise against them" (315-316).

Christina Stead commented on the vision contained here in a memoir she wrote in 1968, "A Writer's Friends":

> at Sydney Girls' High School, I had my first serious project, based on a footnote in the textbook of European history we used. The footnote referred to the *Lives of Obscure Men* and that appealed to me markedly. I planned to do that ... It came back to me later, when I returned to England, after the war and felt I did not understand the people. I began to collect notes for an Encyclopaedia (of Obscure People), to have another title; a sort of counter Who's Who. By this time I knew something about official reference books and I knew some very able people who would never appear there, because of their beliefs ...
>
> With regard to the "obscure men", I did eventually do something of that sort. My first novel was called *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* (title taken from Dickens' *Seven Poor Travellers)* and

> one of my most recent, *Cotters' England* (the working class north of England) has this subject.[10]

Through the course of *Seven Poor Men,* there is another paralysis; the paralysis gripping the city and docks in the seamen's strike. A phase in the struggle between capital and labour, the strike is another paralysis resulting from the socio-economic situation. It is hardly an "image" in fictional terms since we do not "see" the strike; rather it is an absence, an absence of movement, an absence of participation in the maritime network of which Sydney is a part.

From the novel's opening we are told of this network — "liners from Singapore, Shanghai, Nagasaki, Wellington, Hawaii, San Francisco, Naples, Brindisi, Dunkirk and London" (2). Baruch's room overlooks "the wharves of the German, Dutch, Norwegian and Cape lines" (138). From the beginning there has been this lure of the exotic, the potential of escape on this world network. But the escape is in abeyance, for most of the novel the seamen's strike has prevented movement. The only exceptions to the paralysis are a few scab vessels. Winters, Baruch, Catherine and Michael see one sail:

> The vessel was an island trader putting out with scab labour picked up round the wharves. They all looked at it with aversion as if at an unclean thing. (198)

Michael remarks of it:

> "I'd like to join them ... to see what it is like to join a lost ship, to be with the lowest of the low." (198)

And Michael is the only person who does get out of Sydney before the strike ends, with his suicide. His outsider status, his non-belonging, is analogous to the lack of cooperative, socialist commitment, the non-unionised desperation and opportunism, of the scab labour on the schooner. Indeed, Michael goes on to respond to Catherine's charges of being "a class, or social traitor" by claiming "I have no class ... I am a man alone" (198). Michael has

no sustaining political faith. He pretended to a socialism in order to get closer to Marion Folliot. But what characterises him is a lack of any belief. His suicide is emblematic of his isolated individualism. We might compare the protagonist's suicide in Jack London's *Martin Eden* after he has lost his sustaining belief in socialism.

Michael's suicide is a mark of defeat. It is no effective escape. But the novel does not end with him. It moves on, the strike ends, and Baruch and the Folliots leave Sydney. In one sense they seem deserters. Their commitment to socialist action is suggested, by their departure, to be unstable. They were middle-class intellectuals, not the proletariat proper on whom the socialist future depends. The Folliots return to England to their inheritance; Baruch goes to America to get into business. As much as Michael in his suicide or Catherine in her retreat to the mental asylum these escaping figures can be seen as having failed in their political beliefs and abandoned the collective struggle.

But at the same time there is a powerful force for escape in the novel. The emotional commitment to getting away is something that gives the ending its poignancy and complexity. Joseph's staying behind is not an unqualified positive. Christina Stead herself escaped from Sydney in 1928 and in her novel *For Love Alone* (1945) Teresa's process of escape from Sydney is the dominant note. The impetus of rejecting the place you were born in and yearning to move on runs through *Seven Poor Men* and *For Love Alone;* but it coexists with an equally strong impetus to memorialize Sydney, to make it memorable in literary terms and put it on the literary map.

To escape Australia for educational or cultural experience in Europe has been a pervasive feature of Australian middle class life. But Stead is not presenting a vision of cultural riches elsewhere. Michael, after all, did get to Europe and experience the horror of the first world war; some escape.

There is no escape, in Stead's vision. The illusion of escape is an evasion, and it is associated with the other evasions considered in the novel that serve to prevent organized co-operative social action.

> "We should have struck long ago," said Baruch regretfully.
>
> "No, I don't strike. I want to run things my own way. I'm not a whining underdog. I want to be manager, I want my money. I'll make my own way or not at all."
>
> "Well, our relations are stereotyped," concluded Baruch drily. "This identical situation occurs in hundreds of small shops, because we're not organised. You're too good to strike, you want to run other workers. Joseph's priest won't let him strike. You're intriguing with a man you know to be a pig, Montagu; I'm counting on getting away to America. That's the great secret: how does a small minority oppress a large majority? — we count on making a getaway. We don't realise our whole life is bound up with a million others: we're all individuals. We believe in God, luck, astrology." (193)

Although poverty is omnipresent in *Seven Poor Men*, it does not totally dominate. The characters are crushed, but not absolutely defeated. There is a core of resistance in the political activities of Catherine, the Folliots, Tom Winter and Baruch. Just as the despair of the novel's culminating events — Michael's suicide, Catherine's madness, the various departures — is mitigated by the survival of Joseph, so the overall economic conditions are challenged by the commitment to resistance, to struggle. In these insistent positive notes Christina Stead's fiction refuses that despair and nihilism characteristic of modernism, while remaining clear-eyed about social realities.

At the same time as emphatically including these socialist thinkers and activists in the novel, asserting a positive, resistant stance, Christina Stead is also concerned to indicate the various limitations and inadequacies of these political figures. It is important to stress that this is not presented as an attack on these figures. Rather, she establishes a shared socialist hope, and her criticisms are made within the movement. Henry Lawson similarly wrote stories attacking certain aspects of unionism in order to correct errors and improve perceptions. These are not external, hostile accounts but attempts at raising consciousness to perceive limitations and avoid making the same mistakes again.

The inclusion of radical activists and thinkers as a major part of her cast means that Stead's characters are able naturally to discuss political and social themes. This should hardly need remarking; but the predominant fictional development of the twentieth century has been the surrender of ideas; English language novelists have fled from the explicit discussion of political, economic or philosophical ideas, characters have rarely debated substantial issues. The developing stress was on aesthetic form, on manner, on implication: ideas could occasionally creep in through the imagery, through the patterns of symbol.

The exclusion of ideas was not total, of course. A number of writers resisted this, and Stead is important amongst them. She has no embarrassment in dealing with substantial issues, and she readily allows her characters to make explicit utterance about them.

Baruch Mendelssohn especially is a mouthpiece for progressive ideas in *Seven Poor Men*. "My first study of my husband to be," she said in an interview.[11] Baruch harangues Joseph:

> "... in this country where you are technically all free, where you all vote and think yourselves political governors, where the land is free and you have no complications, if it weren't for your crazy bounties to protect what won't grow cheaply and your tariffs as high as the moon to protect the uneconomic industries of cheap capitalists, you should live in an earthly paradise: you shouldn't have to think of any other heaven. And what do we see? Beggars, tramps, thousands of workless in misery, poor mothers whelping yearly generations who get wretcheder, gaols full of criminals, madhouses of madmen, extravagance, superstition. You might as well be in the depths of Bulgaria."
>
> "Madmen and criminals," said Joseph, "can't be helped; you get them everywhere."
>
> "Certainly, I recognise the doctrine," replied Baruch; "the natural, the child of God; the criminal, the hounded of God; the madman, the scourged of God. Our psychologists in America have re-established the Binet-Simon test of intelligence which shows infallibly that poor children are ten per cent below the

> average, middle-class children at par, and rich children ten per cent above the average. That is the democratic way of putting the old doctrine; and it proves that foolery and knavery corrupt the most serious of men. This doctrine is intended to and does crowd 'human beings into noisome cellars, and squalid tenement houses, fills prisons and brothels, goads men with want and consumes them with greed, robs women of the grace of perfect womanhood, takes from little children the joy and innocence of life's morning.' I didn't make that up, that's from Henry George." (89-90)

Henry George was an important figure in the radical movement in the nineteenth century, not only in his native America, but also in Australia, where he gave a lecture tour in 1890. By the 1920s, however, George's ideas were no longer in the forefront of radical thought. In the next chapter we encounter Tom Winter, the Communist union organizer, who declares:

> "There's only one book yew need to know, an' that's Marx, an' only one exegesis yew want to read an' that's Lenin on Marx." (125)

There is a certain cut and dried quality to Winters' politics, he lacks the sinuous charm of Baruch. Winter takes a simple class line and opposes Baruch's statement "I'm a natural Communist; everyone is my brother:"

> "That's what's the matter," said Winter bitterly, "yew orter hate the upper classes; they're our natural enemy ... No, yew got to be uncommunist towards the capitalists; yew got to hate the capitalists. That's just it; that's just it. Yew want to make the workin'-class movement respectable by fraternity, by sincerity, by scientific socialism, by ease, by opportunist pacifism. But worst of all, yer on the make. Yew want to be a scholar. Am I a scholar? Er all them thousans and thousans of miners an' dairy-farmers an' boundary-riders an' painters an' truck-drivers an' wharfies scholars. There's only one book you need to know, an' that's Marx ..." (125)

Winter's dialogue is represented in an obtrusive, clumsy quasi-phonetic way. It is not a mark of authorial contempt or condescension towards the working class, as it generally is with Patrick White. Stead's intention, I suspect, was to mark out Winter as unambiguously proletarian; whereas the Folliots are upper-middle class English, and Baruch, as Winter shrewdly observes, wants to mix in the society of intellectual socialists, in a world of socialism become respectable.

Winter is later gaoled for his political activities. He is presented as consistent, principled, committed. What he says about the dangers of socialist intellectuals who betray the movement is an important part of the experience of the labor movement, part of an important internal debate on strategy, and significantly related to the novel with the departure from Australia of the Folliots and of Baruch.

> "I'm suspicious o' all intellectuals, and we got a right to be. We been betrayed too often. It's too easy for yew fellers to pass over into the other camp, an' be a barrister, a writer, a historian, a clever journalist. Wot's the fate o' so many labour-leaders? the whole world is acquainted with them; the upper classes laugh themselves sick over them. They rat: like MacDonald. And then, are they ashamed? No: they are lonely, misunderstood spirits, self-sacrificed to duty." (126)

The ambiguity of the Folliots' role in radical politics is demonstrated in the speech Fulke Folliot gives to the striking seamen in Communist Hall. He talks about having gone to school with the Nationalist prime minister:

> "I went to school with him, and the dear fellow was along with me in Trinity College, that was near seventeen years ago. At that time he was thinking of taking orders, and if he had he would at this moment be sitting in some Paris restaurant swapping *mots d'esprit* with fashionable actresses and dragging in Jesus Christ very adroitly to honour the cloth. (172-3)

What emerges is Fulke's fascination with power, with the ruling class from which he has come and to which he returns. As Winter

remarks to Joseph, "I don't think it's quite the style for the seamen" (174).

Baruch has earlier summed up the Folliots to Catherine:

> "If I must say what I think," said Baruch, "they are romantics. They would be delighted to have a police-raid. Ever since their marriage they have had nothing but splendid adventures with the police and frontier-guards, and have always got off scot-free, of course. Fulke's father is a rich amateur collector of paintings. Marion's people are high up in the Government service in England. There are no romantic scuffles with a policeman in the life of the working-people. It riles me when I see Fulke get up before a body of bleak-faced, whiskered, half-starved men and get off his cheese-cake eloquence and well-bred witticisms. I don't care if he has passed a merry quarter-hour with a traffic policeman in Moscow and discussed breakfast with Lenin." (148)

This fear of the *agent provocateur*, the police agent in the ranks of the labor movement, is part of the realistic vision of radical political action. It is a world of watching and surveillance. "We spend all our lives watching each other like cats," Baruch says to Catherine (149). For the Folliots political activism, editing the *Independent Worker*, is a romantic game, or worse; but Winter ends up in gaol.

Seven Poor Men does not offer an unrealistic, romantic vision of social hope. There is no successful revolution; there is no successful cooperative action. It offers an analysis of the political situation, and resists nihilism by indicating those forces in opposition to the dominant system. But it provides no false hopes. The radical movement is in constant fear of being weakened by desertions or informers. What Stead offers us is an inside picture of the uncertainties and contradictions and uneasinesses of the left. It is not an external attack from a right wing position. The weaknesses observed are all weaknesses the members of the left were only too well aware of. The uncertainties, the ambiguities, are part of the texture of that world. And it is a world in which there are many undercurrents, many contradictions, many unexplained things: this is not the classic nineteenth century

bourgeois novel in which everything is explained, conspiracies revealed, meanings made clear. Social activities are no longer seen as so easily explicable. The sense of not understanding, of not comprehending, is part of the subject of the novel now. We encounter these radical thinkers through Joseph, who feels an outsider, ill-informed, unaware. And this unresolved sense is part of the world of the twentieth century novel, its difference from that clearer nineteenth-century vision.

1. Brian Kiernan, in *The Penguin New Literary History of Australia*, ed. Laurie Hergenhan *et al*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1988, 274.

2. H.M. Green, *A History of Australian Literature* (1961) revised by Dorothy Green, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1985, II, 1158.

3. Dorothy Green offers a contrary view: "the inner world, in short, is the world not of seven men and a woman, but of one woman, Catherine, whose selves have been separated and given a local habitation and a name." "Chaos or a Dancing Star?" *Meanjin* 27 ii (1968) 154.

4. Christina Stead, *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* (1934) Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1965. All quotations from this edition.

5. Letter, 8.7.72. Christina Stead, *A Web of Friendship: Selected Letters (1928-1973)*, ed. R.G. Geering, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1992, 457-8.

6. Chris Williams, *Christina Stead: A Life of Letters*, McPhee Gribble, Melbourne; Virago, London, 1989, 164-5, 177-9, 208-13.

7. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, translated by Samuel Moore (1888), Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1973, 68, 71.

8. Karl Marx, *Capital*, volume I, translated by Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling (1887), edited by Frederick Engels, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1978, 724.

9. Robert Louis Stevenson and Lloyd Osbourne, *The Wrecker* (1892), William Lane, *The Workingman's Paradise* (1893).

10. "A Writer's Friends", *Southerly* 28 iii (1968) 163-8, reprinted in Christina Stead, *Ocean of Story*, Viking, Melbourne, 1985, 496-7.

11. Ann Whitehead, "Christina Stead: An Interview", *Australian Literary Studies* 6 (1974) 241.

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